The Lesser of Two Evils

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/67903296.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Star Wars - All Media Types
Relationship:	Jango Fett/Obi-Wan Kenobi
Characters:	Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jango Fett, CC-2224 | Cody, Mij Gilamar, Clone Trooper Boil (Star Wars), Clone Trooper Waxer (Star Wars)
Additional Tags:	Mandalorian Empire (Star Wars), Order 66 Happened Differently (Star Wars), Dead Dove: Do Not Eat, Dualsex Stewjoni | Stewjoni Produce Both Ova and Sperm (Star Wars), Stewjoni Obi-Wan Kenobi, Stewjoni Biology (Star Wars), Obi-Wan Kenobi Needs a Hug, Hurt Obi-Wan Kenobi, Sheev Palpatine Dies, Inspired by Integration - Millberry_5, Dark Jango Fett, Jango Fett has Issues, Power Imbalance, Cult dynamics, Possessive Behavior, Instead of found family its enforced family
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of When Darkness Falls
Collections:	Anonymous, Integration: The Collection
Stats:	Published: 2025-07-21 Updated: 2025-12-28 Words: 90,980 Chapters: 40/?

The Lesser of Two Evils

by Anonymous

Summary

shatterpoint; The moment Jango Fett met Obi-Wan Kenobi on Kamino.

“The Republic has fallen. And the Jedi with it. We are in a new era now… a Mandalorian era.”

Another Mandalore wins the clone wars fic. It's dark guys. Obi-Wan is going to suffer.

Chapter 1: Reality's Break

Obi-Wan found Cody directing troops. He looked exhausted, armor dusted with soot and his voice hoarse from shouting commands. Still, Cody smiled, just a small crinkle at the corners of his eyes as he handed Obi-Wan back his lightsaber. The gesture reminded Obi-Wan of Anakin in his Padawan days: loyal, and earnestly kind.

He was grateful, as always, for Cody's watchfulness.

But the war wasn't done. Close, yes. But not yet over. Obi-Wan shifted his focus. He had to see this through to the end. Then, maybe, he could rest.

Cody watched him go, the weight of inevitability sinking in. The time was coming. Soon, all of this… the battles, the bond, the mission; would be over. He had *enjoyed* their time together, in the strange way soldiers sometimes do. Not that it was truly ending... but everything would change. Obi-Wan would be in custody then. He would struggle with the transition.

It was in the middle of those thoughts that the message came through: **"Activate Order 66."**

None of the clones had active chips anymore. They had been neutralized long ago, replaced by loyalty of a different kind. But the order was still valid. The protocol still stood.

Under Mand'alor Jango Fett, the Jedi would fall. Some were to be kept for redistribution into the new Jetise temple on Mandalore and others who showed better sings of accepting the changes would help train the younglings in the temple. They would be loyal to their new empire. It was the only way to ensure a smooth transition of power.

The Jedi were too loyal to the Republic. In a Mandalorian galaxy, their existence was no longer tenable. It was simple fact. A truth that comforted Cody.

And at least *his* General wasn't on the kill list.

Still, he prepared his men. When the battle ended and Obi-Wan returned to them tired, vulnerable, they would secure him. For now, they would protect him. Support him. Let him come back believing he was safe.

Which, from a certain point of view… he was.

Obi-Wan was leaning heavily on Boil, insisting he was fine, that it was *"just a cut."* Because of course he did. That was their General.

Cody sighed and stepped forward, gently taking Obi-Wan's wrist. The motion caught Obi-Wan off guard, a frown forming as their eyes met.

"The war is over, General," Cody said softly. "You have time to rest."

And with those words, Cody clicked the beskar suppressor into place.

It latched with a final-sounding snap.

Obi-Wan recoiled, confusion flaring instantly to alarm. He yanked at his wrist as if the metal burned, but it didn't. Cody knew it didn't. That was never the danger.

"Take it off, Cody." His voice was sharp with disbelief. "I don't know where you got that or what you think this is, but it's not funny."

Cody didn't flinch as he reached onto obi-wans belt and stole his lightsaber. When obi-wan protested in surprise he just sighed and turned to Boil and Waxer.

"Take him to medical. Top priority. You know how he is… he'll downplay his own injuries to make sure the rest of us get treated first."

He clapped Obi-Wan on the back like always, like everything was normal.

Obi-Wan just stared at him, flabbergasted, confused, and not quite able to believe what was happening. He kept protesting, half-insulted, half-bewildered.

It was only when he was physically *forced forward*, against his orders, that something in his eyes changed. Shock gave way to realization.

That was the moment Cody knew: his General had figured out something was seriously wrong.

It was fortunate that Waxer and Boil had been preparing for this from the start. Obi-Wan hadn't earned the name *The Negotiator* for nothing.

He began speaking, persuasive, demanding, calm at first, then sharp. But he was met with a wall of silence.

That was disconcerting.

His questions were ignored, and the grip on his arms tightened, just a little too firm. He was not quite guided, not quite dragged, through the corridors toward medical. A place that had always meant safety.

Until now.

When they reached the medbay, Obi-Wan faltered. Among the clone staff stood a man in full Mandalorian armor, leaning casually against a wall as though *waiting* for him.

Obi-Wan blinked, then narrowed his eyes. "And who the blazes are you?"

The man looked up, his voice curt. "Mij."

That name meant nothing. And that was somehow worse.

“I mean,” Obi-Wan added, insistent now, “On whose authority are you here, on this vessel, in this medbay?”

Mij tilted his head slightly. Then, in a voice devoid of all warmth, said: “Please sit on the examination table.”

Obi-Wan straightened. “Not until someone starts telling me what is going on here!”

Mij sighed and signaled to the others. Waxer and Boil moved toward Obi-Wan, but he pulled back sharply and stepped toward the table himself, irritated.

“I see you don’t take *no* for an answer,” he muttered.

“I don’t,” Mij replied, without missing a beat. “The war is over. You are no longer a general or a Jedi. You are in my custody until we arrive on Mandalore. Until then, your health is my responsibility. I will conduct a thorough examination before you are secured for the journey.”

Obi-Wan stared at him. “I’m sorry… I don’t understand what’s happening here. The war is over and I’m now in… *Mandalorian* custody?”

Waxer and Boil shifted uncomfortably. They had never seen their General look so lost.

But they said nothing. Keeping him in the dark had been part of the mission. Necessary.

Mij gestured for Obi-Wan to lie down for an initial scan. He hesitated, then complied, stiffly, warily.

“Yes,” Mij said, activating the scanner. “The Republic has fallen. And the Jedi with it. We are in a new era now… a Mandalorian era.”

Obi-Wan paled. “That’s not possible,” he whispered, though the words rang hollow.

“This isn’t funny,” he added, almost like a question. Like he was daring someone to laugh and break the illusion.

“No one is laughing,” Mij said flatly.

Then the readout lit up—and Mij’s expression changed.

“What the kriff, guys?” he snapped, turning toward Waxer and Boil. “The reports didn’t capture his true condition! He’s malnourished. Two old fractures—rib and collarbone—that healed *badly*. And a fresh leg fracture. That one I understand. The rest should have been treated *long ago.*”

He grabbed Obi-Wan’s arm and began drawing blood. “This will be Cody’s problem, not mine. He’s been on protection detail for the duration. Let *him* explain this to the Mand’alor.”

Waxer lifted his hands defensively. “We did our best. The General—”

“He’s *not* a general,” Mij snapped.

Waxer flinched. “Right. Obi-Wan… he always made sure *we* were treated first. By the time it was his turn, there was always another mission.”

Mij set the needle aside with a clatter. “And none of you thought to *insist*?”

Boil’s jaw tightened. “And give it away? He thought he was still our General. To keep the ruse going, we had to obey him.”

Mij hummed, unconvinced, and tapped something into his datapad. “He’ll need several surgeries and a significantly improved diet. The surgeries will have to wait until we reach Mandalore, but we can begin nutritional correction immediately.”

Obi-Wan sat very still, sick and confused and suddenly very far away. “I… don’t understand,” he murmured again.

Mij glanced at him, shook his head. “You’re experiencing mild shock. That’s to be expected.”

A sharp ache flared in Obi-Wan’s shoulder… then faded. Something cold bloomed through his bloodstream, and the world began to slow. Voices dulled. Sounds blurred. His thoughts came unanchored, floating sluggishly.

“That should help with that,” Mij added, almost to himself.

Obi-Wan blinked slowly, eyes unfocused. Mij moved around him, checking joints and old scarring; quiet, efficient, detached.

“That’s better,” Mij muttered. “Fewer questions. Easier to manage until he’s securely situated.”

Waxer and Boil exchanged a glance but said nothing. They remained by Obi-Wan’s side throughout the rest of the examination and walked with him when he was wheeled to the secured med-cell. They were pleased they could be there for him in their own quiet way… even if Obi-Wan was unaware of their loyalty.

By the time the ship was underway and Cody had finished overseeing the transfer procedures, Obi-Wan was sound asleep.

Mij was already in the cell, checking sensor readouts and vital monitors when Cody arrived.

He handed over the datapad without ceremony. “You’ve seen the report. His condition is unacceptable.”

Cody glanced over the screen. “Expected. I was honest with the Mand’alor… we could protect him or deceive him. Not both.”

Mij’s mouth flattened. “You call this *protected*?”

“He’s alive,” Cody said simply. “And mostly intact.”

A pause.

“That was the mission.”

Mij didn’t argue. Just turned back to the monitors.

Cody stepped closer to the transparisteel partition, watching Obi-Wan sleep beneath the soft medical glow. He looked younger like that. Bruised. Drained. But peaceful.

Peaceful in the way only drugs or exhaustion could achieve.

Cody sighed and folded his arms. “He fought me every step of the way. I did the best I could.” He glanced at Mij. “You heard anything from Coruscant?”

Mij shook his head. “Not yet. I assume if something had gone wrong, we’d have heard by now.”

Cody hummed, thoughtful. “If anything did, it’d be the Sith.” He rubbed a hand over his face, exhaustion dragging down his features. “We should’ve brought the general in before Grievous. Then maybe there’d have been time to get to Coruscant. Help out.”

“He’s not a general,” Mij reminded him, cutting off the ramble. “You need to get that straight if you’re going to serve as his head of security.”

Cody grunted. “Force of habit.”

Mij turned to face him fully. “It happened the way it did for a reason. The Mand’alor needed it to unfold *exactly* like this. The Republic would’ve been suspicious if we’d extracted him too soon. Besides—” he gestured loosely toward the medbay monitors, “—the Mand’alor didn’t want him anywhere *near* Coruscant when everything went down.”

“If something had happened to him?” Mij’s voice dropped, steel-hard now. “Our Mand’alor would’ve had our heads. It was safer this way. For *everyone*.”

Chapter 2: Sith's End

Palpatine had foreseen everything. Everything was unfolding exactly as he had willed it. Anakin had bowed, *desperate, despairing*, cracked open by grief. He would do anything for Padmé… not that it would save her.

Yes. *Everything* was a success. But nothing thrilled him so much as watching that broken shell of potential bend to *his* authority.

Magnificent.

He had long hungered for this… Skywalker, raw and luminous, wasted on that pathetic Jedi, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Unpeeling Kenobi's tainted compassion from the boy would take time. But he would enjoy it.

He hadn't been surprised when that little green goblin with the ridiculous waddle arrived at his office, arrogant and calm. He had predicted it. *Wanted* it. Wanted to watch those ugly frog eyes *widen* when they saw true power.

What he hadn't predicted… was that Yoda would bring company.

Maul.
Ventress.
Ahsoka Tano.
And a full squad of Mandalorians in full beskar.

On their own? No threat.
But together? In sync. Focused.
And worst of all, their beskar rendered them *invisible* in the Force.

He was… *actually* caught off-guard.

How?
How had he not foreseen this?

He had bent the Force to his will for decades. He had ruled through shadow, precision, inevitability.
And now, *just* as everything was coming together, the Force had turned on him. Or gone *silent*.

But still—*still*—no one was more powerful in the Force than him.

…Or so he believed.

It was Maul who struck the final blow.

Yoda and Maul had moved like breath and heartbeat… unexpectedly synchronized.
But Maul's fury was what drove his blade: righteous, grieving rage for his brother.

The lightsaber plunged through Sidious's gut… and then *up*.

Yoda did not finish the fight.
He didn't need to.

It was already over.

He sat down heavily on the floor, breathing hard, and looked up at the others.

The **Mand'alor** stepped forward with a pair of binders.
"Remember the deal," he said.

Yoda's ears drooped. He nodded once. "Over, it is."

The Mand'alor started forward—but young **Tano** stepped in his path.
"Permission to do it," she said.

He held her gaze for a beat—then handed her the binders.

She knelt before Yoda, calm and grim, and clasped them around his wrists.

Yoda accepted it from her.
She carried sorrow in her eyes… but also determination.

The younglings were safe.
The elders, too.

It was something.
A future, of sorts, for those left behind.

Yoda would still teach.
He would simply never touch the Force again.

They left the office in silence, stepping over the body of Darth Sidious.

He was not worth another moment of their time.

Obi-Wan woke with a pounding headache and a creeping wave of vertigo. Worse than that was the *silence*… a hollow void where the Force had once pulsed through him.

Panic bloomed immediately.

He sat up too fast, groaning as the room spun. Hunched forward, hands gripping his head, he tried to breathe through the noise of his own pulse hammering in his ears.

At least the lights were dim. Small mercy.

He swallowed hard and looked up, trying to assess. A secure medical room. He was alone, for the moment at least. That gave him a sliver of time to get his bearings. Maybe even formulate a plan.

Clearly something had gone very wrong.
The clones had declared themselves for Mandalore?

Shaky, he pushed to his feet and staggered to the fresher. He didn't kid himself; he was being watched. But privacy was the least of his concerns.

He relieved himself, washed his hands, and splashed cold water over his face. That helped. A little.

The door slid open with a hiss.

The Mandalorian, *Mij,* entered, carrying a tray of food and water. Obi-Wan turned to face him, watching warily as the man crossed the room and placed it on the bedside table.

"Come and eat, Kenobi," Mij said simply.

Obi-Wan studied the setup for a moment. "Very well," he said at last, and sat back on the bed.

Mij turned the tray table and locked it into position over his lap.

Obi-Wan didn't protest. He had never felt so unmoored.

Mij stepped back, arms folded, and took up a silent watch in the corner.

Obi-Wan eyed him briefly before lifting the lid from the tray.

A bowl of steaming stew. A thick wedge of fresh bread. Several pieces of sliced fruit. Everything hot, fragrant, nourishing.

He raised an eyebrow. "What service," he murmured, then picked up the spoon and began to eat.

Mij didn't reply. But he leaned back slightly, easing against the wall.

He was watching like a bantha crowding her calf; hovering, protective, and very hard to read. It made Obi-Wan wonder just how many Jedi were in similar positions right now.

Delicate touch, he reminded himself. Getting answers would require it.

"I take it," Obi-Wan said lightly, "that the Grand Army of the Republic is now the Grand Army of Mandalore?"

Not his best line. But he had a headache straight from Sith's hell.

Mij shrugged. "I thought you were supposed to be smart. Work it out, *Jetise*."

"Oh, rumours of my mental powers have been *greatly* overestimated, I assure you."

Mij squinted at him. "Which is why you talk like a bloody senator?"

Obi-Wan nearly choked on his stew. "I most certainly do not!"
…Right. Probably not the most relevant part to be outraged about.

He coughed once and tried again. "Would you mind telling me why I've been detained? I wasn't aware I was considered an enemy of Mandalore."

Mij snorted. "As if. Arrogant much?"

Obi-Wan exhaled slowly. *Wrong foot, clearly.* He needed to reorient.

"I wonder if you could confirm who's currently ruling Mandalore?" he asked carefully. "Bo-Katan, perhaps?"

The change was instant.

Mij *hissed*, low and sharp. Obi-Wan stilled.

"None of that family will *ever* be Mand'alor," Mij snapped. Then he broke into a stream of harsh-sounding Mando'a, the tone enough to make it abundantly clear: whatever he was saying, it was *not* a glowing endorsement of Bo-Katan… or, by extension, Satine Kryze.

Obi-Wan held back a flinch. *Good,* he thought with a pang, *that Satine isn't alive to see this.*

Mandalore had turned.
Back to its violence.
Its hunger for power.

And Obi-Wan was very much alone.

After the mention of Bo-Katan, Mij shut down completely. He didn't speak again outside orders. Just stood there, arms folded, watching.

Obi-Wan finished his food, all of it. Mij had insisted, gruffly, and with the kind of stubbornness that didn't allow room for protest.

As Mij moved to remove the tray table, Obi-Wan tried one last time.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice low, careful. "If I've offended you… that wasn't my intention."
A breath. "I would ask just one question. Just one more."

Mij didn't stop moving, but his posture stiffened slightly.

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said, "you could tell me the whereabouts of a Jedi. Anakin Skywalker."

That got Mij's attention. "Why you'd think I know the whereabouts of *any* of your kind is beyond me. You, and you alone, are my mission."

Then he turned towards Obi-Wan, voice sharpening. "But I *can* tell you this: your precious Order is no more. Most of the Jedi were killed when their troopers turned on them. Too arrogant, I suppose, to consider that their slaves might fight back, take back their power and lives."

And just like that, Mij turned and started toward the door.

Obi-Wan scrambled to his feet, panic bubbling up from deep inside. "Wait!" he called, staggering after him. "*Wait!* You can't be serious!"

He reached out, stumbling. "They wouldn't… they were *loyal!* Many of them were friends! They *wouldn't*—they *couldn't*—"

Mij turned back just as Obi-Wan reached him.

"You've been out for two days," he said flatly. "Your fracture is nearly healed. But you need to be careful."

A pause.

"Lie back down, *Jetise*."

Then, colder still:

"Rest.
Your friends will still be dead when you wake up."

Obi-Wan barely registered time passing after that.
He couldn't believe it was true.

But then he remembered Cody. The moment he slipped the suppressor around his wrist…
The way he'd clapped him on the back like it was any other day, like he hadn't just betrayed his idiotic trust.

Like it was kindness.

It seemed the clones hadn't valued the Jedi the way the Jedi had valued *them*.
Obi-Wan had loved his men… all of them. He had risked his life to save them, time and time again. Despite their protests.

And they had done the same for him. *Hadn't they?*

He went over the war in his mind, turning memory after memory over like worn stones.
Looking for the crack. The shift. The moment the betrayal began.

But he couldn't see it.
They'd been close, hadn't they? In their way.

A motley crew, yes, but a family all the same.

It had felt like family.

Much like the Jedi.

You didn't need to be born into the same bloodline to be family.
Growing up in the Temple had taught him that.

He supposed… he'd simply continued that belief with his men.

Was he so blind?
So foolish?

So wrong?

It didn't make sense.
None of it made any sense.

He sat like that for hours, unmoving, his eyes fixed straight ahead, searching for an answer to the questions that plagued him.

But there were no answers.

Just a sick, gnawing agony trapped low in his belly, poisonous and heavy.
And with the Force severed, he couldn't release it.
Couldn't *ease* it.
He was *trapped* in it.

It twisted inside him, relentless.
Eating at his thoughts.
Eating at his hope.

Hope that maybe, someday, things might be okay again.

Chapter 3: Runi'oyay'dinuir

Ahsoka walked the halls of the Temple, this time, as a teacher.

But the ways of the Jedi were no more.

There was a team of twelve Mandalorian Force-sensitives who would teach alongside her. Yoda, too, and a small number of other Jedi who now wore Force suppressors as a symbol of transition.

It was strange, walking down these long, echoing halls.
The rooms stretched out around her, hollow and still. Their numbers were too few now. Most of the Temple stood empty.
For now, she told herself.

But the ghosts lingered at every turn.

She missed them. They had been her family.
But the Sith had succeeded in poisoning the Jedi from the inside out.
And for that reason alone, a reset had been necessary.

Too much power had been entrusted to a people who, when tested, had too easily forsaken their own guidance. Their own morality.

She had seen it long before she knew what it was.
Had fallen into step beside Anakin.

Anakin who, thank the Force, was still missing.

Obi-Wan was safe.

But *Force*, had that been a twist she never saw coming.

Still, it had worked in their favour. In the galaxy's favour.

A shatterpoint, she supposed.

The moment Jango Fett met Obi-Wan Kenobi on Kamino.

She, herself had been recruited just days after leaving the Jedi. A woman in Mandalorian armour had found her in the lower levels and told her she had an offer. A way forward.

A way to right the wrongs Ahsoka had felt helpless to change.

The woman had spoken of the Sith. Of Sidious. Of who he *truly* was.
That had been a shock, a terrible one. Knowing how close Anakin was to him.

But she had known one thing for certain:

Anakin was loyal. Fiercely, completely.
To those he loved.

And while he *loved* her… he also loved *Palpatine*.

If she wanted to save him, *really* save him…
If she wanted to protect the younglings, salvage whatever good was left of the Jedi…

Then this was the way.
The *only* way.

So, despite her many misgivings, despite the waves of grief and guilt that never quite stopped, Ahsoka had joined forces with the Mandalorians.

Because someone had to choose differently.

And she had *already* walked away from the old path once.

The Force felt clearer now. But sometimes, she looked at the Mandalorians; ranked, obedient, loyal to the point of blindness, and wondered just how different their creed really was.

Still, it was too late now.

Cody was irritated with Mij.

Mij had been assigned to ensure Obi-Wan's safe passage to Mandalore and see that he arrived in *better* health than he'd left the battlefield.

Instead, Mij had been cruel. Not physically, but with his words. Deliberately so, from what Cody could tell.

And now Obi-Wan sat silent, unmoving, staring straight ahead as the hours ticked by.

He ate when ordered. Slept, fitfully, in fragments.

But the man Cody had known was gone.
What remained was a shell.

Cody even understood Mij's ire. What he didn't understand was why it had been Obi-Wan who bore the brunt of it.

Maybe that was easier—easier than facing himself.
Easier to be jealous that Jango Fett hadn't changed for all of Mandalore combined… but had for a single Jedi.

But that wasn't Obi-Wan's fault.
It wasn't Obi-Wan who had failed to take up the mantle of Mand'alor when his people needed him.
It wasn't Obi-Wan who'd let Mandalore splinter, let their ways be forgotten.

It wasn't Obi-Wan who had sold his very DNA to the Kaminoans to fuel a foreign war.

He hadn't asked for any of this. He had only stumbled, blind and unsuspecting, into a plot larger than he could fathom—walked right into Jango's front door and, in doing so, altered the course of Mandalorian history.

He hadn't meant to. But he had.

And Jango had changed.

For *him.*

That was what stung Mij, Cody suspected. Not justice. Not honour.
Petty. All of it. Rooted in jealousy.

Confronting the man had perhaps been a mistake.

Cody had known it before he'd even opened his mouth. But by then, it was too late to swallow the words back down.

"You were supposed to help him," Cody said flatly. "Not harm him."

Mij looked up from the datapad, unfazed. "He's alive, isn't he?"

Cody's jaw clenched. "Barely."

Mij's posture didn't shift. His voice was measured, bored. "He eats. He sleeps. He follows orders. Seems like a win to me."

"That isn't *care,*" Cody snapped. "That's just you doing the bare minimum while venting."

Mij finally met his gaze, sharp, narrowed. "What do you want from me, Commander? Comfort? He's not your General anymore. He's not your friend. He's property of Mandalore."

"No," Cody said, stepping closer, voice low and cold, "he's the soulbearer of the Mand'alor. And *you* are treating him like a war criminal."

Mij's lip curled. "He's a Jetise… do you even know what they have done to my people?"

"He's *not the reason you're bitter,*" Cody bit out.

The words landed. Mij's nostrils flared slightly, a crack in the mask.

“He didn’t ask for any of this,” Cody pressed. “He didn’t scheme his way into the Mand’alor’s heart. He didn’t betray Mandalore. If you’ve got rage, fine… aim it at Jango. Aim it at fate. But leave *Obi-Wan* out of it.”

Mij didn’t reply.

Cody shook his head and looked away in disappointment, the moment hanging in the air between them like a suspended blade.

“You want to see him comply? Thrive? Survive this? Then stop grinding your heel into what’s left of him and *do your damn job.*”

He turned on his heel and left before the silence could deepen into something worse.

Behind him, Mij stared at the door, fists clenched, face unreadable.

Obi-Wan felt the ship shudder. They had arrived.

He wasn’t sure what he thought about that, if he thought anything at all. Feeling was harder. There was too much of it. And not enough.

He sat in the corner of his room, wrapped in a blanket pulled from the bed, and waited.

They came for him, of course. Cody was with them. So were Mij, Waxer, Boil… and others he recognized. Faces he had once called *brothers.*

“The full honor guard, sir,” Cody said lightly, then corrected himself. “Obi-Wan.”

He didn’t know what Cody expected from him. Gratitude? Forgiveness?

Obi-Wan hadn’t seen him since the moment he’d clapped the suppressor onto his wrist, then patted his shoulder like it was a kindness.

It wasn’t hatred that burned in Obi-Wan’s chest when he looked at him.

But contempt wasn’t far off.

He stood when directed. Said nothing as they cuffed his wrists. Let them guide him out of the med-cell and into the halls of what had once, *almost*, felt like home.

He was led into the flight deck and onto a larger shuttle, then secured into a seat. Everything was done with careful precision.

“Worried you’re going to fail your mission in the final minutes?” Obi-Wan asked, not bothering to look at Cody. He didn’t need to. He knew he’d hit the mark. He knew Cody.

But he almost wished he didn't.

Cody's voice was tight when he answered. "We land in forty. Your new household staff will be waiting to meet you. They've been preparing to work with you for the last year. They know what they're doing."

A beat.

"My suggestion… if you don't want to see more of me than strictly necessary, comply with their requests."

Obi-Wan looked at Cody with unbidden bemusement.
"Household staff?" he echoed. "I can assure you, I have no need of them. I doubt they'll come in handy for a political prisoner."

Mij snorted with contempt, earning a sharp glare from Cody. The doctor turned away, but Cody added, more levelly,
"You're not a political prisoner, Obi-Wan. You're… the Mand'alor's guest."

Obi-Wan lifted his bound wrists, brows raised.
"Really? I've spent a fair amount of time on Mandalore, but I must have missed the tradition where guests are greeted with binders. If I'd known, I'd have brought a spare pair on previous visits."

Cody barked a laugh. "Good to hear you're still in there. You had me worried these last few days."

"Oh, I wasn't trying to be funny," Obi-Wan replied, voice perfectly dry. "That was sarcasm. I was aiming for an edge of disdain, but I can see I've failed at it."

Cody didn't drop his grin, and Obi-Wan had to remind himself not to scowl. That would give too much away.

He wanted to tear the happiness from Cody's face, rip it to shreds the way they'd done to *him*.

But despite what they said… despite everything… he was *still* a Jedi.

It was boring, he supposed, when it came to revenge.

Falling would be easy.

Staying a Jedi, *despite* them, would be hard.

But it would be better.

Surely it would irritate all the right people.
Let that be his revenge, his *stubbornness*.

It had driven the crèche master's to long meditation sessions.
Even Qui-Gon, for all his patience, would eventually admit defeat against Obi-Wan's immovable will.

It wasn't always considered ideal for a Jedi.
But Obi-Wan had always known what he was good at…
and being a dog-eared blight on the galaxy was, frankly, one of his more enjoyable skills.

Chapter 4: Acidic Welcome

When Cody announced they were five minutes out, Obi-Wan decided to break, just a little of his pride.

Maybe Cody would give him something.
Something that would help him grieve… or finally let go of hope altogether.

He might despise Cody for everything he'd done.
But the man still might hold the answer to the one question pounding in his skull.

"Cody?" he asked quietly.

The change in tone was so abrupt, Cody narrowed his eyes, suspicious.
Not what Obi-Wan had aimed for, but anyone would forgive him for losing his touch under the circumstances.

"I was wondering if you had any information on Anakin."

Cody sighed. "I'm sorry, sir. That's not something I'm permitted to discuss with you right now."

Obi-Wan felt his anger rise but held it back, for now.
"You know what he means to me. If you've ever had an ounce of respect for me, you'd—"

"Enough," Cody interrupted coldly.
"You need to start listening to the boundaries we set. This is not a debate. There is no room for manipulation. I will not disobey a direct order."

A wave of rage rose in Obi-Wan, intense, foreign, so sharp it shocked the breath from him.
His intake was so sudden it was audible.

Cody misread it.

"I don't know why you'd be so surprised," he said, almost casually.
"I've always followed orders."

"Indiscriminately, it seems," Obi-Wan bit out before he could stop himself.

"If you think that was an insult, you'll be disappointed," Cody said.
"But go ahead. Say what you have to, sir."

"Oh, disappointed doesn't begin to touch on it. But I expect you know that," Obi-Wan said, his voice as pleasant as he could manage.
"Even if it turns out you're not half the man I thought you were."

Cody actually had the gall to look as though Obi-Wan had slapped him.

It only made Obi-Wan angrier. Cody didn't have a *right* to look hurt. Not now. Not after—

No. Don't think of it. **Don't** *remember.*
Breathe. Distract. **Don't** *think of them.*

Cody shut down a moment later, his expression tightening as he studied Obi-Wan like something unfamiliar.

"You'd do well not to burn the last bridges you have to stand on," Cody said flatly.
"My understanding is, your life is going to be hard enough without antagonizing the last people who actually care about you."

Obi-Wan made a sound, feral and sharp, forced through clenched teeth. His lips peeled back from his top teeth in something too close to a snarl.
"The war was over!" he hissed. "We were finally going to have peace!"

He sucked in a breath, only to feel the sting of tears slip down his cheeks. Reflexively, he moved to wipe them away…
Only to be reminded that his wrists were still bound.
He couldn't even do that.

Cody didn't soften.
"You were," he said. "But you never did think past yourself or your Jedi order, did you, sir?"

Obi-Wan froze.

"*What about me*?" Cody asked, voice rising. "*What about my brothers?* The men you *claimed* to care so much about?"

Obi-Wan blinked at him, stunned.

"Did you *ever* put a moment aside to think about our future?" Cody pressed. "The lives we were supposed to build out of the *scrap heap* left behind after *your* war? The one we were bred to *die in*?"

Cody took a breath.

"What were our lives worth? Less than yours? Less than the Jedi's? Less than a citizen's?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"Well, *not anymore*. I'm just as much a person as you."

The silence that followed felt sharp enough to cut skin.

"So keep going with your short-sighted righteousness," Cody said, quieter now.
"I thought you were different. But clearly, *I* was wrong."

Obi-Wan felt the nausea hit without warning.
He leaned forward and, just as the ship touched down, he heaved up their carefully planned breakfast all over the shuttle's polished floor.
He took no satisfaction in the way it splashed across Cody's, Mij's, and several others' boots. The stench was rancid, and it sent him into another wave.

"Where's the kriffing medkit?!" Cody barked, already moving.

Obi-Wan was surprised to feel a hand on his head, lifting his face, checking his pupils.
Mij?

The others had stepped back, swearing, but no one cursed *him*.
He felt something cold press to the back of his neck. He flinched, tried to move away—
—but was held firmly in place.

"Slow, deep breaths, sir," Cody's voice came through the fog.

Obi-Wan nodded, barely. The cold was helping. He clung to it, forcing himself to centre.

He needed to pull himself together.

And that, of course, was when the ship doors opened.
The ramp extended with a hiss of hydraulics, sliding down toward rows of staff in perfectly neat lines, waiting to greet their honoured guest.

Senate Building, Mandalore – Office of the Mand'alor

The polished doors whispered closed behind him as Jango stepped into his newly repurposed office. Not his choice, this place. Too much glass, too many sycophants lurking in the corners. But the Mandalorian people had demanded a presence here. A symbol of leadership in the halls of power.

For now, at least, it would have to do. Until he could install his own people. Until the Republic was properly untangled. Eventually, the galaxy would revolve around Mandalore. But without the proper infrastructure, that wasn't yet possible.

He set his helmet down on the desk with a solid *clunk*, barely catching his breath before one of his aides, an efficient, stone-faced woman named Rook, stepped inside.

"Alor," she said with a sharp incline of her head. "The Runi'oyay'dinuir has arrived. Touchdown confirmed ten minutes ago."

Jango straightened slightly. "Uneventful?" he asked, already reaching for the holoscreen.

Rook hesitated. Never a good sign.

“There was… a minor incident on landing, sir.”

Jango’s eyes flicked up. “Minor?”

She cleared her throat. “There was vomiting. Possibly stress-related. Commander Cody requested a medical review upon arrival. Apparently, the Runi’oyay’dinuir had a strong reaction to a conversation en route.”

Jango’s expression darkened. “What conversation?”

“We’re still reviewing the footage, sir, but initial reports indicate it involved a discussion about General Skywalker and… command loyalty.” A beat. “It seems Commander Cody voiced many of his opinions on the situation after the Runi’oyay’dinuir attacked his character.”

Jango didn’t speak for a long moment.

Then he said, very softly, “Bring me the transcript.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And tell Myles I want a full review of Mij’s conduct before nightfall. If Obi-Wan arrived sick and shaking in front of a full reception line, someone *failed.* I want to know who. And *why.*”

“Yes, Mand’alor.”

Rook bowed and left with silent speed.

Jango stood still, jaw tight, staring at the faint glimmer of dust motes in the light streaming through the office window.

Obi-Wan was finally home.

Sundari, Mandalore - Keldab be Mand’alor

The newly installed medical wing was pristine. Fitted with the latest tech it was obvious that no credit had been spared in its design. The sterile shine of chrome and white made Obi-Wan feel like he was still ship bound. It was efficient, spacious, and quiet, located on the same level as his “apartment” though he had yet to see it, he had been told by some very proud staff that it was perfectly appointed and luxurious to match his new station. Not that anyone had been willing to inform him what his new ‘station’ was?

Did they hope he had force knowledge he was willing to share? Or was this to do with Anakin? Or… the clones? Had Cody made an agreement to keep him safe? He was clueless

and no one would answer his questions… obviously they had all practiced deflection. It was obnoxious.

Mij was in his element here, the head of the small medical staff, issuing orders like he'd been born in a lab coat. The others deferred to him instinctively, no hesitation in their movements, no questions asked. It was a hierarchy Obi-Wan recognized. He'd served under similar men. Cold competence. Arrogance edged with precision. He could handle Mij. Predictable, at least.

The exam was thorough, and though Mij made a show of professionalism, his hands lingered a little too long when checking the suppressor or evaluating muscle tone, not inappropriately, but with the surety of someone not needing to get permission from a patient. He was in charge here and Obi-Wan would not forget it.

Still, better the devil you know… though he couldn't help but wonder how many devils this place held.

He tuned it out. Let them prod and scan and murmur. Instead, his eyes drifted upward to the ceiling, the walls, the corner-mounted surveillance nodes blinking steadily in sterile blue. He mapped the room in his mind. Noted the positions of exits, supply drawers, emergency call buttons.

Then he shifted his focus to the two armed guards stationed just beyond the transparisteel partition.

And then to the second pair, inside the double doors leading to the main corridor.

Four, for a medical exam.

Unreasonable. And that was before he counted the ones he undoubtedly couldn't see. If Cody was involved (and he had no doubt that he was) then the ones he could see were just there for show… as reminders that he shouldn't try anything.

He sank back against the inclined bed, something bitter curling in his chest. The silent hope he hadn't let himself examine, that perhaps, somehow, there might be a window of opportunity, an unlocked moment, a poorly timed distraction, evaporated.

He was locked down. Utterly.

Even now, in a place that didn't feel like a cell, with medical personal who didn't wear the armour of jailers, he was no less imprisoned.

Mij noticed his shift in focus, because of course he did. "Don't bother," he said without looking up from his datapad. "They rotate every four hours. Interior and exterior coverage. And they're under orders to tranq if you so much as look off-course."

Obi-Wan raised a brow faintly. "I wasn't planning an escape."

"No," Mij said smoothly. "But you were hoping for one to present itself."

Obi-Wan didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. The silence had already confessed for him.

Chapter 5: Anakin's Flight

Anakin had witnessed Palpatine's triumph… only to watch it collapse not long after.
He'd been en route to the Temple when the clones escorting him attempted to clamp a Force suppressor onto his wrist. He'd twisted away, instincts sharp, and leapt from the open-sided transport before they could react.
He still felt it — the deaths. Thousands of Force-sensitives, snuffed out like candles in a storm. Their loss rang through the Force with unbearable clarity.
But only one truly mattered.
The moment Obi-Wan's never-fully-severed training bond dimmed like a dying star, Anakin knew something had gone wrong. Not death. But something just as violating.
It wasn't like the others.
Had Obi-Wan been targeted with a suppressor too? Had he not seen it coming?
If it had been Cody… Force, it was believable. Obi-Wan had trusted Cody implicitly. Just as Anakin had always trusted Rex.
And Ahsoka…
Ahsoka, who had vanished without a trace. Who had never once reached out.
He understood. Of course he did. She had walked away from everything — from him — just as he had walked away from the Jedi.
But understanding didn't make the ache go away.
It never had.
But now… he could feel her. Not far — somewhere near the Temple, perhaps. It didn't matter. She was alive. Strong in the Force.
That was enough for now.
He had to find Padmé.
Had to make sure she was okay. That she lived.
That she stayed that way.
That their child was safe.

Obi-Wan was led in a silent procession of staff out of medical, away, at last, from Mij.
Cody walked at the front, nodding crisply as they passed security at regular intervals.
It was a performance, and Obi-Wan knew it.
A message meant for him.

Cody was telling him there was no escape.

He didn't need the message spelled out. He wasn't foolish enough to think there was an easy exit.
Still, he couldn't help wondering; did Cody's presence mean Obi-Wan was under his protection?

If so, the man needn't have bothered.
Obi-Wan would rather have faced the same fate as his fellow Jedi than be locked in this… polished prison.

The security surrounding his so-called *apartment* was absurd.
He noted it all: the checkpoints, the surveillance nodes, the keycard access, the biometric locks.
If this was a gilded cage, it was still a cage.

And Cody?

Just how high up had he risen in this new galactic order?

He must be close to the top, Obi-Wan thought grimly.
To command all this?

He felt wholly ill-prepared when the doors shut behind him, only to find another set just as formidable ahead.

They opened into a vast chamber, its towering windows arching into the ceiling to flood the room with sunlight. It overlooked Sundari.

The last time he'd been here…

It did no good to dwell on what he'd lost.
If he thought of Satine, he wanted it to be for her light, undiminished by Maul's cruelty.

Cody was watching him, of course, studying his reaction.
But Obi-Wan had long since buried his expressions behind the familiar mask of Jedi indifference.

"How pleasant," he said to Cody, voice smooth. "But you needn't have gone to the trouble on my account. We Jedi are used to surviving on the basics."

Cody didn't respond. He merely turned toward the lineup waiting just beyond the threshold.

Household staff; that's what Cody had called them.

Obi-Wan studied them with quiet suspicion. Warriors, every one of them. Even without armor — except for the guards — they stood like soldiers. Disciplined. Dangerous.

What had Cody said? that they'd been training for this for a year?

How long had Cody's friendship been a ruse?

Or worse… how long had Cody cared enough to believe this fate was somehow kinder than death?

Did Cody… think this was kindness? Mercy? Or something more?

Obi-Wan turned back to him. Cody was still watching, gaze too steady to read.

He opened his mouth, thought better of it, and closed it again.

Better to wait. Better to see how this played out.

Cody stepped forward, shoulders squared, voice taking on that cool command tone Obi-Wan remembered from the field.

“Allow me to introduce your household lead,” he said, with a formality Obi-Wan hadn’t expected. “This is Vexa Tural, Former Alor’ad of the Fourth Fang, decorated strategist, and former instructor at the Vencuyot War College.”

Obi-Wan’s brows lifted, despite himself.

Vexa inclined her head in acknowledgment; sharp, precise, unapologetically cool.

“She’s been appointed by the Mand’alor as the final authority over this household while he’s away,” Cody continued. “That includes security, scheduling, and your day-to-day oversight.”

“I see,” Obi-Wan said mildly, masking the flicker of unease. *That* was not a normal head of house, he was seriously missing something here and he didn’t like it one bit. She was over qualified but proud to be here. A quandary.

Cody’s eyes met his, unreadable. “She is not a jailor. She’s here to ensure your wellbeing, and the safety of those around you.”

Which was a poetic way of saying *in case you fail to comply*, fight back, or try to escape.

Vexa stepped forward then, and he tried to cover up his flinch, she didn’t seem to notice, her voice even. “You’ll find I’m efficient, not indulgent. I won’t waste your time, and I don’t expect you to waste mine. You have my respect, Runi’oyay’dinuir. I expect your cooperation in return. I am not here to indulge you, I am here to ensure stability.”

There was no cruelty in her voice or demeaner, Just certainty. This was a woman who had commanded armies, and now she commanded *him*. He needed to know what he was missing, and soon, if he had any chance at navigating the situation he had found himself in. It was becoming clearer that this might not have anything to do with Cody.

Obi-Wan nodded faintly. “Understood.”

He didn’t miss the way the guards relaxed.

Vexa moved with the unhurried confidence of someone used to command. Her voice carried easily in the sunlit chamber, crisp but not unkind. “I’ll make the introductions brief,” she said. “Everyone here knows who you are.”

Obi-Wan inclined his head politely, Jedi diplomacy still intact, at least on the surface.

“In security, you’ll answer to Cody, who you already know” Vexa nodded at Cody who nodded back, “You’ll see him most often. Shift rotations pass through him.”

Obi-Wan didn’t know whether to be resentful or relived that he at least knew someone in amongst this madness.

“Logistics and provisioning, that’s Kira Dama,” Vexa said, indicating a wiry woman with a half-shaved scalp and a datapad already in hand. “Anything you need; dietary, medical, educational — she handles it.”

Obi-Wan’s mind snagged on that word: *educational.* What, exactly, did they think he needed to learn?

It didn’t matter. Not really. He wasn’t listening anyway. Not properly.

Vexa moved on. “Medical liaison remains Mij. For now.”

That snapped him back for half a second; just long enough to register the sharpness beneath those words. *For now.*

“Household operations and communications: Ren Avas,” Vexa finished, motioning to the last of the lineup… a quiet man with a datapatch on his temple and hands folded neatly behind his back. “He handles scheduling, messaging, and transport clearance.”

Another nod. Another unfamiliar name. Another reason Obi-Wan’s stomach twisted in quiet confusion.

He said nothing. Just bowed his head again.

A perfect captive. A gracious guest.

What in the Force was this?

He tried to look attentive. It was, after all, the expected thing. But his thoughts were moving far too quickly. Spinning down trails he couldn’t afford to voice aloud.

Why was he here?

Not just *alive*, but given rooms, staff, *oversight*?

Why not a prison? A cell? Why this careful luxury?

And more pressingly, *who* was Mand’alor?

Could it be a successor? Not Bo-Katan and all the other’s he could think off were off the table for one reason or another.

A clone?

Or—

No. That was madness. That wasn't…

"Do you have any questions?" Vexa asked, dragging him back into the room.

Too many.

He could ask who Mand'alor was.

He could demand answers.

But something in the air told him to wait. To observe. To play the long game.

So instead, he smiled faintly, the kind of expression that once disarmed politicians and warlords alike.

"No," he said. "Not at this time."

Vexa studied him for a moment longer, then turned back to the others. "Dismissed. Return to rotation."

The staff dispersed smoothly. Silent. Efficient.

And Obi-Wan was left standing alone except for Vexa, surrounded by sunlight and silence, no closer to the truth than he'd been the moment he stepped off that ship.

But one thing was becoming clearer with every passing hour.

He wasn't here by accident.

And whoever Mand'alor was…

They wanted something from him.

Vexa didn't linger once the others had gone. She turned crisply on her heel and gestured for Obi-Wan to follow. "Come," she said simply. "You should know your domain."

My domain, he thought bitterly. *What a word for a cage.*

Still, he followed. What else was there to do?

The first doors opened at a touch, revealing a sitting room. Spacious and tasteful. A sunken firepit at the center, shelves lined with actual books, and soft seating in muted coppers and creams. The kind of calm one might engineer for a temperamental noble or a long-term hostage.

"This is your reception area. You may entertain approved visitors here when permitted. Surveillance is active but discreet."

Obi-Wan's eyes flicked to the corner-mounted node. It blinked a quiet blue. He nodded once, unsurprised.

They moved on.

Down a short corridor, she led him through a set of double doors into the formal dining room. A long table, wide enough for a war council, stood beneath a sculpted overhead light. The walls bore subtle inlays of beskar, stylized in swirling patterns, decorative, yes, but also symbolic. The space had the weight of intention.

“Meals will be served here. You may dine alone or with your staff. The kitchen and prep facilities are through there…” she gestured to a seamless panel in the wall “…but you are not to enter. Those rooms are restricted.”

He glanced at the panel. No obvious keypad. Sleek smooth metal. He didn’t miss the warning behind her words.

Vexa led him on, past another door he didn’t recognize. “That’s a service access. Staff use only.”

He noted it. Filed it away. Not because he planned to disobey, not yet, but because he *needed* to understand the borders being drawn around him.

She continued: a private study, done in cool slates and blues, lined with more books, no doubt he’d have the opportunity to examine them more closely later.

Further on there was a meditation alcove, surprisingly understated. A small garden terrace with sealed transparisteel walls. A training chamber.

He stopped in the doorway at that last one.

Vexa noted the hesitation. “You’ll be cleared to use it once your medical evaluations are complete and reviewed.”

“How generous,” he murmured.

She let it slide and instead opened the last door, “You’ll find clothing in your wardrobe, toiletries in the refresher. Your schedule is synced to your datapad. Staff will knock before entering unless there’s an emergency. You are expected to comply with medical appointments, mealtimes, and regular assessments. Resistance will be noted. And corrected.”

Obi-Wan arched a brow at that. “Is that a threat?”

Vexa met his gaze without blinking. “No, Runi’oyay’dinuir. It’s standard protocol.”

The room itself was lavish.

Obi-Wan took it in slowly, cataloguing details more like a prisoner than a guest. A wide, canopied bed stood against one wall, too large for a single occupant, the covers heavy and tailored in Mandalorian weave. Rich fabric panels softened the walls, muting any echo. A

low-slung seating area stretched along the windowed side of the room, complete with a reading shelf, a heatstone hearth, and a transparisteel view of Sundari's skyline.

There were art pieces too, abstract, but intentional. He could feel the weight of meaning behind them, a story of battles long ago.

A private 'fresher branched off to one side, the door inset with subtle lighting. Beyond another archway, he could glimpse an alcove perhaps a surveillance point dressed in disguise. He wouldn't be surprised.

The whole place was warm, too warm, clearly temperature-controlled. Controlled. Everything about it was controlled.

Because despite all the amenities, despite the thick carpets, the tailored clothes, the careful touches meant to soothe, there were no sharp edges. No cords. No visible access ports. Nothing he could disassemble or repurpose.

He nodded once, then glanced back toward the fresher. "I assume surveillance is present there as well?"

"Every room," she confirmed. "Though, in the fresher it is inactive unless we have reason to be concerned."

Of course.

Finally, she stopped in the centre of the corridor and turned toward him fully. Arms behind her back, posture flawless.

"These quarters are yours, Runi'oyay'dinuir. Within their bounds, you are afforded some autonomy. Outside them, you are under guard. Attempting to bypass those restrictions will result in sedation and tightening of current restrictions. No exceptions."

He held her gaze a moment. Then offered a shallow bow.

"A generous leash."

Her expression didn't flicker. "A necessary one."

She gestured back toward the bedroom. "Rest. Familiarize yourself. You will be informed when dinner is served, I'll return in the morning to review your first week."

Padmé was angry with him.
He shouldn't be happy about that, but he was.

If she was angry, then she was *alive*. She was *herself*.
She had given birth to twins, and though it had exhausted her, he'd been there beside her, holding her hand. And she had lived.

Her anger was expected. He *deserved* it, really.

The four of them were in hiding now, tucked away on Alderaan.
He hadn't been sure Bail Organa would help.
Had he heard about Windu? Did he know what Anakin had *almost* done?

But Bail had been *relieved* to see them alive. He'd offered aid without hesitation.
Padmé had wanted to go to Naboo, of course, but that would be the first place the Empire would look. Alderaan was the safer choice.

She was still angry, though. Still ranting.
How he could betray the Order… the Republic… *her*.

He kept telling her he hadn't. That he'd never given up on *her*.
But Padmé couldn't separate herself from the Republic, not yet. To her, his fall felt like a personal betrayal. A wound.
Still, each day her scathing words grew cooler.

She had two infants now, and his help was needed.
He was a good father, attentive, gentle, endlessly patient.
He told jokes that made her crack a smile, just when she looked ready to cry from exhaustion.

And it helped. It was helping.

But even in the quiet of these days, he still worried for Obi-Wan. For Ahsoka.
He *knew* he'd have to leave this life someday, his perfect little hiding place, his family.
He'd have to go back out there. Find them.

But not yet.
Not while the twins were so young.

Chapter 6: Jaster's Ghost

Jango reviewed the report from Myles. They would be arriving at Mandalore within hours, and he needed to decide how to deal with the *Mij problem*.

Technically, Mij hadn't broken any protocols. Obi-Wan had never been in physical danger. He hadn't been harmed. His medical care had been thorough, even attentive, at least, where his body was concerned.

But mentally?

Mij had been negligent. Wilfully so. He'd treated Obi-Wan not as a patient, but as a problem. As a threat. As someone he *needed* to punish.

Mij had always followed orders. But somewhere along the way, he'd started following his pain instead.

A vendetta. That's what it was. And Obi-Wan wasn't the right target.

Still, Jango hesitated.

Mij had always been loyal. He had served under Jaster with a fervour that bordered on faith, a man who believed in a future Mandalore worth building. When Jaster died, something in Mij had died with him.

Jango hadn't just lost a father that day. He'd lost his compass… and Mij had lost his hope.

And when Jango had returned, freed from slavery and scarred by the Jedi, Mij had looked at him like a second coming. Like Jaster reborn.

But Jango hadn't been Jaster.

He'd been a shadow. A disappointment.

Not anymore. Not in Mij's eyes. Not since the war.

But some damage doesn't heal just because you win.

Jaster's ghost still lingered between them. And it always would.

Obi-Wan stood staring out the windows overlooking the city for longer than he had meant, lost in the emptiness he was allowing to overtake his mind. He had just decided to look over his un-jedi like clothing when there was a soft chime.

He didn’t answer, but the door opened anyway, of course it did.

Vexa stood on the threshold, posture relaxed but her eyes alert. “Dinner is served.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Am I expected?”

Vexa didn’t smile, but there was something just shy of amusement in her voice. “You are the guest of honour, Runi’oyay’dinuir.”

The title still sat in his mind like gravel in a boot; small, constant, impossible to ignore.

She waited until he moved, then fell into step beside him. She didn’t offer her arm, didn’t try to make conversation, didn’t pretend he had a choice. But her pace was unhurried, her body language calm.

The dining room looked the same, but now the long table had been set for eight. Subtle lighting glowed from overhead panels, casting a warm wash across polished wood and muted metals. Steaming dishes had been laid out with precise symmetry, fragrant and colourful, but not ostentatious.

Cody was already there. Mij, too. Kira and Ren sat near the far end, chatting quietly. Waxer and Boil, his traitorous, loyal soldiers, flanked the seats closest to the door.

They all stood as he entered.

Vexa gestured to the seat at the head of the table, angled slightly toward the large window overlooking Sundari.

“Please,” she said. “Sit.”

Obi-Wan did, slowly, watching all of them with the wary instinct of a man who knew a trap when he saw one.

Everyone resumed their seats, and just like that, the performance began.

Cody leaned forward, arms resting on the table with a soldier’s casual grace. “We’re glad you’re here, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan tilted his head. “Here?” Obi-Wan echoed. “In Mandalorian custody?”

Boil smiled “Not custody, sir. Home.”

Waxer nodded, adding with soft conviction “It was touch and go for a while,” Waxer said, voice quieter. “But we got you here.”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth. Closed it. He wasn’t sure which part of that statement disturbed him more, the implication that they’d expected him… or that they'd wanted him.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what exactly I’ve made it to,” he said evenly, eyes scanning the room. “No one has yet explained what my… presence here entails.”

There was a pause.

Then Ren said pleasantly, “Dinner.”

Kira added, “You must be hungry.”

“I *was* asking about—”

Vexa interrupted smoothly. “The food was prepared with your needs in mind. High in protein, low acidity, and all items were vetted through medical. Mij approved the final selection.”

Mij gave a thin, professional nod. “No allergens. No stimulants. Good for healing.”

Obi-Wan looked at him. “And interrogation?”

Mij didn’t blink. “Only if you talk too much.”

A beat passed. Then Waxer chuckled, and the others followed, a ripple of restrained amusement like polite dinner guests watching a holonet comedy.

Obi-Wan sat very still. Every part of this felt *wrong*.

He tried again. “This role — this *Runi’oyay’dinuir* title. What does it mean, exactly?”

Vexa took a sip of water. “You’ll be briefed. In time.”

“When?”

“When the Mand’alor decides you are ready.”

He turned to Cody. “You’re comfortable with all this?”

Cody met his gaze, calm and unreadable. “I’m here to make sure you’re safe.”

“Safe,” Obi-Wan echoed flatly. “From whom? I’m a jedi, I’m more than capable of keeping myself safe.”

Vexa sat back in her chair “You are not a Jedi. The Jedi are gone. We would ask you to stop pretending otherwise.”

Obi-Wan blinked “very well” he said.

The food was excellent. Of course it was. Obi-Wan chewed mechanically, aware of every eye on him. The staff spoke easily among themselves, never raising voices, never arguing, a smooth exchange of pleasantries and light humour.

They laughed. They toasted his health.

He asked about the Republic. No one answered.

He asked about Anakin. Vexa redirected the conversation to his upcoming schedule.

He asked if they knew the war was over. Ren asked if he preferred his room temperature warmer or cooler overnight.

It was like dining inside a propaganda reel.

Too polite. Too measured. Too careful.

He knew hostage conditioning when he saw it. Knew *exactly* what it felt like to be the eye of the storm, calm, controlled, with devastation held just outside the frame.

Obi-Wan put down his fork.

“This is all very… rehearsed,” he said softly.

Waxer’s smile didn’t falter. “We just want you to feel welcome, sir.”

“I feel like I’m being set up for something.”

Mij shrugged. “You are.”

Obi-Wan looked around the table again, at Cody’s calm guilt, Vexa’s inscrutable pride, Kira’s bureaucratic polish, and the twins’ loyal confusion.

He sat back, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Tell me something, then,” he said. “Something real. Something *true.* No mandates. No scripts.”

The silence that followed wasn’t awkward. It was clinical.

Finally, Cody said, “You’re safe. That’s true.”

Obi-Wan let out a breath. “From a certain point of view.”

And kept eating.

Jango was pleased to be home — this time without needing to hide behind Maul.
The Zabrak was off-world, hunting down the last of the Separatists too stubborn to let sleeping strill lie.
Now, Mandalore knew the truth. Jango wasn’t just a name whispered in backrooms or a shadow ruling through others.
He was Mand’alor. And everyone knew it.

Mij was in his office and had clearly not expected Jango to just turn up. He stood hastily and bowed his head with genuine respect.

“Mand’alor.”
Jango nodded, taking a seat without fanfare. He gestured for Mij to do the same.

“I’m sorry,” Jango said after a long pause, eyes drifting across the room as if looking for something that wasn’t there. “I failed you. I failed all of us. After… Galidraan, I came back already broken. I didn’t want to remember him. Or his legacy.”
He exhaled sharply. “I failed him.”

Mij lowered his gaze, voice quiet. “It wasn’t you who failed Alor. It was me. I didn’t search for you. I believed you dead. I let them erase him — destroy what he built. I stood by and let it happen.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, both steeped in guilt and pain. The air between them thick with a grief that had never healed — Jaster’s ghost still present in every breath.

“Perhaps we both failed,” Jango said at last, his voice low but steady. “Perhaps all of us left behind let ourselves become something unworthy of his name. His legacy.”

He looked up, meeting Mij’s eyes.

“But we can change that now.”
Mij looked up. “That sounds like something he would’ve said.”
Jango shrugged. “Maybe. I’ve learned a lot these past few years. There’s much I haven’t told you yet…”
His gaze sharpened. “I know how you’ve treated Obi-Wan.”
Mij didn’t quite manage to mask the curl of disgust on his lips.
Jango sighed. “Cody was right, then.”

“Cody needs to remember he’s not you,” Mij said flatly. “Sharing your DNA doesn’t make him Mand’alor.”
Jango sighed. “I understand now. I should never have worked with the Kaminoans.”
“No,” Mij agreed. “You shouldn’t have.”
“I’ve been working since then to make things right.”
Mij gave a single nod. “That’s true.”
“I didn’t claim the title of Mand’alor because of Obi-Wan,” Jango said, voice quieter now. “I did it because of what he represents. Because of what his existence means for our people.”

Mij considered that.
Jango stood, gaze steady.
“You might not like him — I don’t expect you to pretend to. He was a Jedi. I know what that means.”
His voice dropped, iron-edged.
“But if you let that hatred interfere with his care again — mental or otherwise — you’ll be reassigned to the furthest outpost in the Outer Rim until I’m convinced you can manage your shit.”

Jango prided himself on his courage under fire. But as he cleared security outside Obi-Wan's rooms, he'd nearly turned back. Twice.

He was a decisive man; make a plan, execute it, don't look back. Shaking with adrenaline like he was mid-hunt wasn't part of the deal.

Obi-Wan wasn't dangerous. Not really. Not without the Force. And if it came to a fight, Jango had no doubt he'd win.

But that wasn't what he feared.

No, this was something harder to name. Something deeper.

He wanted Obi-Wan to like him.

Which, aside from Boba, wasn't a feeling he'd had to contend with often. And in Obi-Wan's case, it wasn't even a possibility. He'd accepted that. Hardened himself to it. But still, hope crept through his veins against his better judgment.

He knew Kenobi despised him.

And honestly? Jango couldn't blame him. He hadn't exactly endeared himself over the years. He'd hoped to build some kind of accord before it came to this, but Obi-Wan had seen through every attempt. In the end, to escape Kenobi's growing suspicion, Jango had faked his own death.

Now the last doors sealed behind him with a quiet hiss, and there he was, Obi-Wan. Flanked by two guards. Spine straight. Expression hard.

Then Obi-Wan saw him.

His mouth fell open in disbelief. His eyes narrowed, fury rising fast.

"Fett?!" he snapped, voice sharp with outrage and shock.

Chapter 7: Little Bogan Beast

Obi-Wan had been informed of the Mand'alor's imminent arrival. He had steeled himself to finally receive some answers — ready to fight for them if need be.

What he hadn't expected was Jango kriffing Fett.

"Fett?!" The word burst out before he could stop it.

This was the man responsible for—of all the fools in the galaxy—this… this *bounty hunter!*

"You!" His face twisted in fury. "You karking son of a Hutt!"

He surged forward, intent on reaching him, but the guards flanking him seized his arms before he could take a single step. He tried to shake them off, but they held firm.

"Really? *You?!*" he spat, incredulous. "You're the grand mind behind all of this? Behind the devastation? *All that death*?"

His voice cracked, rage and betrayal tangled in every word.

"A backwater, scum-eating bounty hunter! *And* you were dead! Deceiving, lying, little Bogan Beast"

Fett, for his part, merely raised a brow and stayed silent.

Obi-Wan jerked again, only to be pulled back rougher. He snarled, "*You* did this. To… to *all of us!* You destroyed the Republic! Why?!"

Then quieter, bitterly, "No… I know why. You bottom-feeders are all the same."

He struggled again, unable to stop his body from reacting, even if he wanted to.

"How?" he demanded. "You didn't do this on your own. You're not *that* bright. But I suppose it explains why the clones would betray everything we fought for… everything we *were*…"

His voice faltered. Fractured. Even to his own ears, it sounded weak.

He fell quiet, trying to claw back calm from the storm.

Then Jango stepped forward.

Obi-Wan's whole body tensed, muscles coiling for a fight. But what came next — he wasn't ready for.

Jango raised a hand and cupped his cheek, sending pleasant shivers across Obi-Wans skin and down his spine. Fingers dragged lightly along his jaw, trailing the line of his neck. Obi-Wan was frozen, unsure what this meant or what he should do.

“There’s no point fighting me anymore,” Jango said calmly, like it was fact, that Obi-Wan should just see it for what it was…

“You won a few of our battles.” A flicker of a smile pulled at his mouth, then vanished. He suppressed it like a mercy.

“But those are over now,” Jango finished. “And I’ve won the war.”

Obi-Wan shook his head, breath catching. He couldn’t believe how *confident* Fett sounded, how sure he was that any of this made sense.

“What is this?” he demanded. “All of it? What’s the point of *any* of this?”

His voice cracked. “Why did you murder them? The Jedi are *gone!* Why? *Why have you done this?!*”

Jango’s expression didn’t change. If anything, he looked almost… patient.

“You may find it hard to believe right now, Obi-Wan,” he said, voice low. “But it was mercy. At least in part.”

He tilted his head slightly. “No small amount of vengeance, either.”

Then he stepped back and motioned for the guards to follow.

“Bring him.”

Obi-Wan stiffened as they gripped his arms tighter again, guiding him down the corridor behind Jango’s steady, unhurried pace.

“In the end,” Jango said, almost casually, “it was for you.”

The words coiled in Obi-Wan’s mind like a poisonous vine. He didn’t even know what they meant. He wasn’t sure he wanted to.

Jango entered the sitting room first, lowering himself onto the couch nearest the fire pit, relaxed but ready, like a predator feigning ease while searching for a weakness in the heard. He waited as the guards shuffled Obi-Wan forward.

Obi-Wan felt like his stomach was twisting in on itself. He was pale; he knew it. For a moment, he thought he might vomit again. He forced a long breath in through his nose, focusing on anything but the pounding in his chest. He had survived worse. He could survive *this.*

He sat deliberately on the opposite side of the fire pit, shoulders stiff, gaze level.

Jango watched him for a long moment, his eyes cool but amused. “Do they need to stay,” he asked, nodding toward the guards, “or are you going to manage yourself?”

Obi-Wan swallowed, throat dry. “I can’t make any promises.”

Jango's mouth twitched in something like a smirk. He turned to the guards. "Wait by the door. You'll be here quickly enough if you need to intervene… though I expect I can handle him."

That smug confidence… Obi-Wan's hands curled into fists on instinct. For one wild second, he wanted nothing more than to drag Jango Fett across the fire pit and smash his perfect Mandalorian face into the stone. He held his composure but it was a near thing.

Fett's gaze was unwavering. Obi-Wan reached for an insult but for once nothing was presenting itself. He had always relied on his wit. On his ability to disrupt the flow of someone else's plan or speech with some well placed charm or sarcasm.

"You remember the day we met?" Jango said at last, voice low, almost amused. "You'd tracked me to Kamino, walked right up like you owned the place. I barely had time to prepare before you were at my door."

His lips curved into a not quite smile. "I knew what you were the moment I saw you standing there. All that stoic Jedi arrogance. Polished, measured… pristine. And none of it mattered."

Obi-Wan's jaw clenched, but he didn't speak.

Jango's gaze sharpened, like a man picking apart a weapon just to understand the way it breaks. "You spoke like the Jedi always do; calm, superior. But you didn't fool me. Not even then. You were angry. You hated what I was. You hated me." He leaned back against the couch, exhaling like it amused him. "But Force help me, I couldn't stop thinking about you after that."

Obi-Wan's expression flickered; confusion, revulsion, maybe even fear.

"I knew what it was," Jango said after a beat. "Because of my buir. Jaster was more than a warrior. He was a thinker. He studied history, read more than most generals. Wanted to know what had broken our people; why Mandalore had splintered, grown weak."

Obi-Wan snorted. "That's not a grand mystery. Your people couldn't stop fighting. Constant war. Generations raised to spill blood and call it glory." His voice sharpened. "If Mandalore fell, it was because it placed no value on life."

Jango didn't flinch. "We valued strength."

"At the cost of your future."

"And what did the Jedi value, Kenobi?" Jango countered, suddenly quiet. "Obedience? Detachment? You gave your children to war, while under the guise of 'peacekeepers'. The jedi order were no better… besides your wrong. We do value life."

Obi-Wan snorted out a mocking laugh "tell that to my people… the ones you had butchered."

Jango shrugged "we are more picky about who deserves it but we do value it… we value our children."

Obi-Wan choked back a cry, leaning forward to ask a question he hadn't known he would have the strength to ask "The younglings who were at the temple then? I can assume they are all safe and well?"

Jango didn't miss a beat "of course."

Obi-Wan stared at him, trying to gauge the truth.

Jango didn't flinch. "At a later date," he said, "we can visit. If that's what you'd like."

Obi-Wan didn't respond. He couldn't. He kept looking, searching for something to anchor him; some line between Kamino and here. But the path remained blurred, fractured beyond comprehension.

Jango let the silence stretch a beat before continuing, as if returning to a conversation only he had been having.

"There were times in our history when Mandalore was an empire. We thrived. We ruled vast regions of the galaxy, not by accident, but by creed. We followed the Way. We sought the will of the Manda, and in that, we found purpose."

Obi-Wan said nothing.

Once, he might've found this interesting; a culture, a people, a philosophy. But now? It was just noise. The only thing he wanted was a *reason.* An answer for the devastation. The betrayal.

"The Manda," Jango said, gaze distant, "is the soul of all things. In some ways, it mirrors your Force. I believed in it as a child, because my buir believed. But later, I called it myth. A story to comfort the ignorant."

His voice softened.

"Until I met you."

Obi-Wan looked away. Whatever meaning Jango had assigned to their first encounter, it wasn't something he could dignify with a response.

He waited.

Waited for something that *made sense.*

"I see it still, when I look at you," Jango said quietly. "It's like a sense I never knew I had… coming alive. You glow. Not literally, but—" his hand touched his chest, briefly "—in my soul."

Obi-Wan shook his head, disbelief cutting through the fog. "You destroyed the Republic," he said slowly. "Because you saw me... *glow*... in your *soul*?"

He stared at him, almost willing Jango to flinch. “You took everything. You burned the galaxy down. For *that*? *For some delusion?”*

But even as he said it, something inside him hesitated.

It couldn’t just be that.

There had to be more.

Didn’t there?

“Be careful, Obi-Wan,” Jango said, voice suddenly colder. “Mock what you don’t understand, and I will be lenient *once.* Do it again—mock my belief, my soul, the *truth*—and I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Obi-Wan laughed, sharp and humourless. “What more can you do to me? I’ll say what I damn well want about the genocide of my people and your *pitiful* excuses for it.”

Jango went still. Like ice, his tone dropped into something far more dangerous.

“I expect that you will,” he said. “And you’ll face the consequences. But first, you’re going to hear the whole story.”

“I don’t expect—”

“*Silence!*” Jango surged forward, voice a low command laced with fury. “You will be silent while I speak. You will listen. You will not interrupt. I will *tell* you when I am finished. And *then*, if you still want punishment—”

He leaned forward, eyes hard.
“By all means, speak freely.”

Obi-Wan fell silent, fuming, but also… he wanted answers. He *needed* to know what he was fighting.

Jango studied him for a moment longer, then leaned back. His tone shifted, almost reflective.

“I needed to understand it. What I’d experienced. But my buir was already gone, murdered by your people. I had no one left who could explain what it meant. And the Duchess…” His voice roughened. “She had already poisoned much of Mandalore against the Manda.”

At her name, Obi-Wan flinched.

“I found myself in the halls of my enemies,” Jango continued. “Looking for someone — *anyone* — who still remembered the ancient ways. I asked for knowledge. For truth. And they let me in.”

He paused. Watched Obi-Wan carefully.

“They brought me to an armorer.” His voice held something like awe. “She knew the old ways. She helped me see it clearly.”

Obi-Wan’s stomach turned. He could feel the shape of something terrible taking form, but not its edges.

“She told me,” Jango went on, “that in eons past, there were more like us. Still rare, but not *unheard of.* Soul-bound.” He nodded toward Obi-Wan. “Or as the holonet might call them… soulmates.”

Obi-Wan felt his pulse spike. It was a ridiculous notion to anyone sane, but Jango was not sounding sane anymore. However…

He shoved the suspicion down. Refused to name it.

“It was known once, even among the Jedi,” Jango said. “Though they called it something else. A dyad, I think.”

Obi-Wan frowned. That word was unfamiliar.

Jango shrugged, dismissive. “It doesn’t matter. Among my people, it was more than myth. It was *mandate.* The Manda marked its chosen with another sense, a sight for things others could not see, and only the chosen could become Mand’alor. Only they were seen as carrying the blessing of the Manda.”

He looked at Obi-Wan again. And Obi-Wan suddenly felt like prey.

“The Armorer called me blessed,” Jango said quietly. “Named me the rightful Mand’alor. Her people would follow her in this, but first, I had to prove it. I had to defeat the one who held the Darksaber.”

He paused. Not for effect, but as if recalling it with reverence. Jango’s eyes grew distant.

“That’s when I started to see it. The patterns the Manda had woven. My buir’s murder by Jedi, it wasn’t random. It *shaped* me. My hatred, my training, my kills… they weren’t vengeance. They were preparation.”

Obi-Wan shook his head, this was what destroyed the Jedi… madness.

“I learned how to disarm Jedi,” Jango went on. “How to render them helpless. I honed every weakness. I was being *readied*, Obi-Wan.”

He said it with *certainty*. Without room for doubt.
That was what chilled Obi-Wan most.

Obi-Wan shook his head.

“I defeated him with practiced ease,” Jango said, voice low and certain. “Took the Darksaber. And from the shadows, I began shaping a world where you would be safe.”

Obi-Wan couldn't stop the sound that escaped him; part disbelief, part outrage. He shook his head again, but Jango seemed utterly unbothered.

"You're confused," he said calmly, "because you still don't know the truth."

Jango leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

"The clones weren't commissioned by any Jedi. That story was always a lie. It was a plot by the sith, from the very beginning… to destroy your people. To burn the Jedi from the inside out. And they never saw it coming."

"That's not possible," Obi-Wan snapped. "There hasn't been a Sith—"

"Since Maul?" Jango interrupted, sharp. "The one who slaughtered your master while you watched? The one you *felt* — don't lie to yourself. You *knew* what he was. You all did. But what did the Council do?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"They dismissed it. Buried it. Carried on with their arrogance while the Sith played the long game."

"Are you planning to tell me what that was? Or are you too busy speaking bad of the dead?" Obi-Wan asked scathingly.

"I *didn't* give the order to wipe out your people, the Sith did, I just didn't stop it."

Obi-Wan shook his head trying to make sense of this latest information.

"I saved the younglings, as I have already said, the Sith didn't plan to, that was a mercy I offered them because of you." Jango paused here.

"If you are waiting for a thank you, Tatooine will freeze first."

Chapter 8: A Necessary Evil

“I saved the younglings, as I have already said, the Sith didn’t plan to, that was a mercy I offered them because of you.” Jango paused here.

“If you are waiting for a thank you, Tatooine will freeze first.”

Jango would have laughed if he weren’t so kriffing *frustrated*.
Obi-Wan’s attitude — so *brazenly Jedi* — was maddening.

Dismissive. Arrogant.

Even after losing everything, the man still sat there wrapped in that same mask of stoic superiority. Like the entire Republic hadn’t crumbled beneath his feet. Like the truth, the *gift* Jango was handing him, was beneath his notice.

Kenobi didn’t believe him. That much was obvious.

Still… Obi-Wan would hear it. All of it.
And then, *maybe*, he’d finally start to see.

They could start moving forward.

Jango’s voice lowered, deliberate.
“They weren’t the only ones I spared for you.”

That did it.

Obi-Wan stopped shaking his head.
His whole posture shifted; shoulders tight, chin lifted, breath caught just slightly too shallow.
And in his eyes, at last, a flicker of something that wasn’t disdain or disbelief.

Hope.

Real, painful, impossible hope.

Jango felt a smirk curl the corner of his mouth.
“Not shaking your head now, are you, Kenobi?”

Jango *enjoyed* the sight.

He waited — not long — to see if Obi-Wan would crack, to see if that flicker of hope would bloom into something fragile and reckless.

It did.

“Anakin?”
Obi-Wan’s voice was small.
Quiet. Raw.
His eyes were wide, so beautifully expressive.

Jango had always loved his eyes.

Whether narrowed in fury, sharp with suspicion, or soft like this - stripped bare by the weight of care, there was always something to admire.

Always something to want.

He watched his soulbound like a starving man might study a rare delicacy, hungry for more.

Jango didn’t look away.

“He’s fine,” he said, voice steady. Controlled.

And *oh,* had that been worth it.

Letting Obi-Wan stew. Letting him wonder. Letting the fear rot in his gut for days. And then *delivering*, becoming the source of relief. The *only* source.

It was addictive.

The breath Obi-Wan took, that silent, sharp inhale, the way his lashes fell shut, trembling with release…

The small, involuntary shake in his shoulders…

The way his hands lifted to swipe away tears he hadn’t given himself permission to cry.

It was…

Dignified gold.

Jango committed every detail to memory.

“Ahsoka too,” Jango said, watching him carefully. “Though she’d already seen the failures of the Jedi. Yoda… and a few others. I needed enough highly trained Force-sensitives to train the next generations.”

Obi-Wan opened his eyes. Looked at him.

“Thank you.”

The words slipped out before he could stop them; soft, genuine.

Jango filed it away like a victory.
Given Obi-Wan’s earlier remark about Tatooine freezing first, this was no small triumph.
Another quiet battle won against the great ‘Negotiator.’

Obi-Wan turned his face away again, and Jango saw it, the guilt, the shame. The crack in that polished composure. He looked so *vulnerable* like this. So pure in his honesty.

Jango knew he wouldn't get that often. Not in the months to come.

"Do you have a list?" Obi-Wan asked, still not looking at him. His voice was quiet. Controlled.
"Of those who survived?"

Jango considered.

"I have a list," he said slowly. "I don't think it'll help you to see it."

Obi-Wan turned back toward him, leaning forward. His eyes on the floor, they held the kind of fearful desperation that didn't beg but couldn't be silenced.

"It *would* help," he said.
"I can't let go if I don't know *what* I'm letting go of."

Jango hummed. "I'll consider it. *In time.* Once you've shown stability. Compliance. Over time."

That did it.

Obi-Wan's head snapped up. The anger was back, simmering behind his eyes like a stormbank. But he didn't lash out.

"What do you think is going to happen here?" he asked tightly.

Jango gave a one-shouldered shrug. "You'll remain here. No more running."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "Funny. Until your 'death', you were *chasing* me across the galaxy." He tilted his head, voice like silk-cut steel.
"Seems to me… you like it when I run."

Jango almost choked.

Almost.

But he kept himself in check. Barely.

Because *damn it*, Obi-Wan wasn't wrong.
There was nothing more enticing than Kenobi in motion — strength, speed, defiance on display. The elegance of purpose, the sheer fury of it.

Jango let out a slow breath and smirked. "I suppose I do," he admitted. "But I like it better when I catch you."

"And how will you do that now?" Obi-Wan asked, voice low. "As you say, I'm caught. You have me."

He held up his wrist, displaying the thin metallic band that bit faintly into his skin.
“You’ve seen to it that I remain in a constant state of disbalance. I’m sure you know that.”

Jango smiled, but this time, the expression lacked warmth. There was no triumph in it. No humour. Only bitter calculation.

Putting the suppressor on Obi-Wan had been a tactical decision. Not a joyful one. Not what he’d wanted.
He wanted Obi-Wan whole; vibrant, fierce, alive in the Force. That was the man who haunted his dreams.

But he had learned, painfully, that he could not have *all* of Obi-Wan. Not yet.

If he couldn’t hold the sun, he could still catch the rays that reached him.

“You take pleasure in my pain,” Obi-Wan said, quiet and seething. “You’ve clearly done your research. You know what these devices do to Force-sensitives.”

Jango inclined his head. “A necessary evil.”

Obi-Wan’s gaze sharpened. “A *telling* one.”

That landed.

“You claim I’m your soulmate,” he went on. “And yet it seems you’ve given no thought to my wellbeing. No effort to spare me this.”

Jango felt something cold twist in his gut. It sparked, then rose, heat blooming fast from belly to chest, tight and furious.

“‘Soulmate’ is a Holonet term,” he bit out. “That’s *not* what you are to me.”

His voice dropped lower, harder.

“Use those perceptive Jedi ears, Kenobi. We are *soulbound.* This is not some trivial romance. This isn’t poetry and flowers and breathless confessions.”
He made sure to make eye contact with Obi-Wan, his eyes blazing.

“You and I are bound. We *have always been*, across the reaches of the galaxy, across the borders of life and death. Bound by the will of the Manda. *Blessed. Chosen.*”

His tone turned to steel.

“I am not some swooning holostar. You are not some broken waif in need of saving.”

He leaned in, voice like iron wrapped in fire.

“And if you can’t understand what that means, then you’ll receive a *thorough education*, until you do.”

Jango's gaze flicked to Obi-Wan's throat as he swallowed, just a twitch, but enough to betray that the words had landed. He was affecting his soulbound Jedi. Good.

"Meaning what, precisely?" Obi-Wan bit out. "I'm failing to understand what it is you *want* from me. What you believe being 'soulbound' *means*. And why, in all the stars, you think I'd *ever* go along with this madness."

Obi-Wan stood sharply. The guards shifted, but Jango gave a small wave: stand down. Obi-Wan saw it and flinched, and Jango noted it with a flicker of regret.

"Am I to lie around here and grow weak and useless? To wither in a cage while you visit and taunt me at your leisure?"

"No," Jango said at once, firm, but Obi-Wan wasn't finished.

"Then what?" His voice cracked. "You've destroyed my life. My home is empty and may as well be ash, the people who filled it, *gone.* Those of us who remain will never be free. And I want to understand what I am, *who I am*, that you would destroy *everything* I loved!"

"You," Jango said, voice low and certain, "are mine."

Obi-Wan reeled, but Jango pressed on.

"Mandalore is mine. This galaxy — mine now, too. For that to happen, I let Sidious go through with his plan. But listen carefully, Obi-Wan: I did *not* destroy your people. I simply… allowed it."

He stood and stepped forward around the fire pit, gaze hard. "It would have happened with or without me. The Sith had already won. My intervention — *my mercy* — saved many of your kind. Something I didn't have to do, given everything your Order cost me."

His voice softened, just slightly. "But I did it. Because I care about your wellbeing."

Obi-Wan looked ready to keep arguing, so Jango raised a hand for silence.

Predictably, Obi-Wan ignored it. He lifted his chin in defiance. "You're not my Mand'alor. Whatever you may think—"

"Enough." Jango's voice snapped like a blade. "I *am* Mand'alor. You are *mine.* You will learn to obey me… or you will *never* be free of that suppressor."

Obi-Wan's expression twisted — rage and grief braided into something primal. For a heartbeat, Jango admired it. That raw fire, that stubborn light.

But it wasn't the time to indulge.

He nodded to the guards.

"Take him to his room," he ordered. "Let him have the afternoon to consider everything we've discussed. He'll take his late meal there."

The guards stepped forward. Obi-Wan didn’t resist, but the fury in his stride said plenty.

Jango watched him go, silent.

Time. That’s what Obi-Wan needed.

Time and pressure.

Chapter 9: Fracture Pattern

Obi-Wan shook as the door sealed behind him.

He didn't bother checking. He didn't need the reminder. He had been sent to his room; to contemplate, no less.

He shook his head, a bitter laugh catching in his throat.

He was no youngling.

And yet, here he was.

Weakened. Alone. Unable to help those he cared about most.

He stood there, staring straight ahead, still trying to make sense of what Jango had just told him.

Did Jango actually believe that load of bantha piss?

And if he did… why?

At least he had a moment to himself.

He turned toward the bowl of fruit sitting on a sleek side table. It looked like something from a senator's lounge, not a prison. He picked up a shuura and turned it over in his hand.

Not a blemish.

He swallowed and set it back in the bowl, untouched.

In a few days, if he didn't eat it, it would be replaced with a new one.

What a waste.

This was all wasted.

And he was too.

He was still shaking.

He lifted his hand and held it as steady as he could. It trembled.

Chemicals. Hormones. Adrenaline.

They were racing through his veins, and without the Force to anchor him, to command his own body as he had for years, it was *ruling* over him.

And it was all so undignified.

He walked to the seating by the window and looked out over Sundari.

It looked the same as it always had, the domes, the spires, the shifting glow of traffic patterns beneath the city's glassed-in sky. Just like the many times he'd stood and admired the view before.

Once, it had felt like a kind of homecoming.

Back when Satine was here.

Back when he'd known — *really known* — that this place had almost been his home.

That was a dream well crushed now.

This place could never be home.

Not to him.

Not anymore.

She had been slaughtered by Maul, who, last he knew, was *alive*. Though clearly no longer ruling his criminal empire.

And Anakin? Ahsoka? Where were they?

Yoda?

How long would he have to wait to get the answers he needed from his unstable host?

They *couldn't* be free. Not all of them. Not truly. If Anakin were free — *really* free — he would have come. He *always* came. On a dozen missions, against all odds. He had always come for him before.

Were they cuffed like him? Bound by cold metal and poisoned uncertainty?

He looked down at the offensive band locked around his wrist. Beskar. That's what they'd told him. Supposedly unbreakable.

There might be no getting it off without help from—

No.

He cut the thought off before it could finish.

How had he been so deceived?

How had he not *seen* that they despised him all along?

They *had* to. Hadn't they?

He'd laughed with them. Trained with them. Trusted them. *Protected* them.

He had thought—

Force, he had thought they were friends.

How *foolish*. How utterly *humiliating*.

To believe that clones bred for war had ever looked at him as anything more than a commanding officer. A mission. A symbol.

He was a Jedi. That had been enough, apparently, to justify every lie, every betrayal.

There was a terrible pain blooming in his chest, sharp and low and constant. Something he couldn't meditate on. Couldn't release into the Force. The Force didn't speak to him anymore. Not like it used to.

He…

His fist exploded with pain before he even understood what had happened.

He doubled over instinctively, curling around the injury, breath catching.

He looked up in confusion.

The transparisteel window held — of course it did — but the smear of red across it made his stomach twist.

Blood.

His blood.

He'd punched the window.

He *never* lost control like this.

Not even after Geonosis. Not even after Satine.

And now… now this.

He pulled his hand away from his chest and looked at it.

He'd broken the skin. The knuckles were mangled — swelling already, skin split in jagged lines of red. Had he broken it?

It was excruciating and distant all at once — like it belonged to someone else.

He didn't hear the door chime.

Didn't register the muffled sound of entry.

Not until the voices were too close, growing louder, layered, urgent.

Then hands were on him. Gripping his arms. Forcing him upright.

He stumbled.

Vexa was striding toward him before he could even comprehend what was happening. Cody wasn't far behind her.

There was discussion; clipped, efficient — but it barely registered. Words swirled without meaning.

Then Cody's hand closed around his wrist.

And everything snapped into focus.

The pain flared like fire in the back of his mind and his instincts surged up like a wave.

Obi-Wan yanked his arm back, teeth clenched, breath catching.

As if he'd been *burned*.

His voice, when it came, was sharp and furious.

"Don't touch me."

He snarled, the words tearing from his throat before he could think.

His mind snapped back to *that* moment; standing in the hangar, injured but alive, returning triumphant — only to find Cody waiting.

Cody, who had stepped forward with something in his hand. Cody, who had taken his wrist so gently.

And *snapped* the suppressor into place.

The memory struck him like a lightning bolt; so vivid, so sudden he could feel the same sick confusion, the same rush of disbelief, as if it were happening all over again.

Then the betrayal crashed in.

And he was fighting.

Fighting the hands on him; pushing, shoving, trying to twist away.

He didn't know who was holding him, didn't care.

"*Let me go!*" he snapped, fury bubbling past reason. "You don't get to—!"

There was a clatter behind him… a table knocked askew and a muffled curse, probably Cody's.

“*Stand down,*” Vexa’s voice cut through the room like a blade. Cold. Commanding. “Release him. Now.”

The hands retreated at once.

Obi-Wan stumbled backward a step, chest heaving.

Vexa’s gaze pinned him.

Her voice didn’t rise. It didn’t have to.

“You are injured. That is the only reason anyone laid hands on you. *Control yourself.*”

Obi-Wan’s jaw clenched.

He didn’t answer.

He just held his bleeding hand to his chest, shoulders tight, and stared back at her like she was the enemy.

She *was* the enemy.

All of them were.

“Runi’oyay’dinuir, your injury appears to require medical attention,” Vexa said, her voice cool and impassive. “You will come with us now and you will be seen to.”

Obi-Wan took several steps back, his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

He licked his lips. “Is that a request?” he asked, voice hoarse.

He cleared his throat roughly, forcing his spine straight.

He needed to stay strong. Or at least *appear* to be.

Vexa’s expression didn’t flicker.

“No,” she said. “However, how we proceed is your choice.”

“No,” he said simply, and stayed exactly where he was.

“You want to patch me up so you can break me all over again. I think not.”

His hand throbbed. His vision pulsed with each heartbeat. But he didn’t move.

Let them carry him if they must. He *couldn’t* make himself bend any more than he already had.

He took another step back, eyes darting — searching for an escape that didn’t exist.

“Just leave me,” he muttered. “I’m fine.”

Cody sighed; not annoyed, not angry. Just… weary.

“You don’t get to do that anymore,” he said quietly. “Put your health last.”

Obi-Wan blinked.

Cody stepped closer, hands open, voice gentling but firm.

“You’re too important to too many people,” he said. “This isn’t a negotiation, Obi-Wan.”

The words landed harder than they should have.

Too important.

To who?

To *what*?

But they stuck.

Something inside him shifted, not in surrender, but in reluctant recognition.

He looked down at his injured hand, already stiffening and raw. The skin split, fingers puffy with bruising. It looked like it belonged to someone else.

Slowly — *very* slowly — he lowered it from his chest.

“Very well,” he said, voice flat.

Because the hand looked terrible.

Because he needed to bide his time.

Because if he was going to get out of this mess, a crippled hand was more hindrance than help.

He lowered his gaze to the ground.

Let them think they’d won.

The walk back through security was deliberately slow.

Every movement — every locked door, every authorization check — was a reminder that he was *not* free.

Two guards flanked him, and Cody trailed behind. Vexa led the way.

None of them spoke.

Obi-Wan kept his injured hand tucked against his ribs. His other hung loose at his side, as if he *could* fight, if it came to it. As if he was only choosing not to.

They exited his suite and entered a narrow corridor lined with polished black walls and subtle lights embedded in the ceiling. Another door. Another pause. This one required both a retinal scan and Vexa's voice.

He glanced sideways as it hissed open.

"Seems excessive," he murmured.

Vexa didn't respond.

But Cody did, under his breath. "Not for *you*."

The medical wing was as he had left it, clean. Cold. Too quiet.

The lights were too bright. The silence too clinical.

And Mij was already there.

He stood beside a curved medbed, gloved and waiting, his expression unreadable.

Obi-Wan tensed instinctively.

But when Mij approached, it wasn't with scorn or superiority.

He eyed Obi-Wans hand and simply said, "Sit."

Obi-Wan hesitated. Then did.

Mij took his hand with gloved fingers, turning it gently, inspecting it with a strange level of care.

"This is a fracture," Mij said, rotating the wrist slightly. "Here, here, and likely here."

He didn't look up.

"You split the skin over the third and fourth knuckles. Bruising suggests impact with a hard surface. Transparisteel, I assume?"

Obi-Wan didn't answer.

Mij didn't wait for one.

"You'll need osteo-repair for full function. I can initiate that now."

He moved to a console. Obi-Wan watched him, waiting for the cruelty. The comment. The correction.

It didn’t come.

“This will sting,” Mij said, returning with a spray applicator.

And it *did*. Sharp and cold, then dull and buzzing — pain chased by numbness.

Mij worked in silence for several minutes. He adjusted a scanner, aligned a bone-knit array, and wrapped the hand in a sterile synth-band. Every motion was efficient. Clinical. Controlled.

But not unkind.

Still cold, yes.

Still unreadable.

But careful.

Obi-Wan watched him, brow drawn.

“You’re different today,” he said finally.

Mij didn’t pause in his work.

“I was told to behave,” he said simply. “So I’m behaving.”

There was no sarcasm in his voice.

Just fact.

Obi-Wan looked away.

Let them behave.

Let them all wear their masks.

He would wear his too.

Chapter 10: Down to Sleep

Mij made the call without fanfare: Obi-Wan would remain in medical overnight.

Plan A had blown apart the moment Mij clocked the old injuries in his first assessment. Plan B was already rushed. Now they were onto C. This… wasn't unexpected. But it meant Cody was dipping into protocols he'd hoped to save for weeks later if Plan B had held. It felt like a failure that Obi-Wan was injured already. Then again… knowing Obi-Wan, should he have been surprised?

He didn't say it aloud. He nodded curtly and started issuing orders. Extra personnel on rotation. Obi-Wan's room swept twice. Everything that could be repurposed into a tool or weapon locked away. Standard practice, technically, when dealing with a prisoner.

"Prisoner" wasn't a word they used aloud for Obi-Wan, but in his own head Cody didn't mince it.

Obi-Wan watched when he entered, expression unreadable. No comment. No surprise. He knew what this was; he'd been in similar rooms before. Cody needed a visual that everything met standard; if Obi-Wan could find a way to kriff the situation to hell, he would.

Cody locked down the ache in his chest and laid out the new parameters, voice flat with professionalism. "Two guards will remain with you at all times. You must stay within their line of sight. If you need the fresher, one guard will stand at the door; the other will maintain line of sight inside."

Obi-Wan looked away. "I'm not a danger to myself."

"We found you bleeding, with a broken hand beside a transparisteel panel marked in your blood," Cody said—calm, precise, like he was walking a patient through facts. "We're not taking chances."

Silence fell. Obi-Wan let it. Arguing seemed pointless; speaking, more so.

Cody introduced the two guards on first watch and, softer than protocol warranted, reminded him to follow Mij's instructions and comply with medical. At the door he paused, taking in the hunched figure on the bed. Obi-Wan was making this harder than it needed to be… and still, Cody hated how it felt. He nodded to his men and left.

He was already late to logistics. Obi-Wan's "unscheduled trip" had rippled every timetable; those with oversight on his care were not pleased.

They convened in the observation chamber adjoining the medbay—a room meant for diagnostics, not full command. They made it work. Some stood along the walls; others dragged in chairs from the corridor.

The one-way transparisteel offered a clear view of Obi-Wan inside: silent, slightly hunched, left hand elevated and swathed in synthwrap. Overhead, a light flickered as medtechs adjusted his monitors.

Jango sat at the head of the narrow console, elbows on the armrests, gloved fingers steepled to his mouth. Lines had deepened at the corners of his eyes, but none of his edge had dulled.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen yet,” he said, not looking up. “Stabilize, observe, then introduce surgery once routines were in place. When he was ready.”

“He’ll never be ready,” Mij said from the door as he closed it quietly and leaned against the wall, flat. “He’ll resist whenever we do it. So we do it now.”

“You’re late,” Vexa noted, cool as glass. She didn’t need to add more; the air tightened.

Mij ignored it and tipped his chin toward the glass. “He’s already in medical. Sedation’s required regardless. Better to use the opportunity than let him spiral.”

Cody’s jaw ticked, but he held his tongue.

Jango gave a short nod. “Present your candidate.”

“Tarla,” Mij said, indicating the woman already seated. “Bone surgeon. Tactical trauma. One of our best.”

She didn’t rise. “Sir,” she said, then brought up the scans and rotated them with a flick of her wrist.

“These fractures are years old. Ribs, clavicle, ankle—poorly set. He’s adapted, but he’s paid for it in mobility and balance.” She zoomed on the shoulder. “If we don’t correct this, he’ll compensate. Compensation means pain, tension, and higher reinjury risk.”

Jango glanced at Cody. “Can he handle the pain?”

“He’s been doing it for years,” Cody said, almost too quiet.

Tarla nodded. “He’ll recover. It won’t be easy. The suppressor complicates anesthesia—we’ll adjust. He’ll need consistent physiotherapy.”

“Let him limp,” Mij scoffed. “He’s not running anywhere.”

Cody turned, sharp. “He doesn’t need to run to resist. Pain delays recovery. It weakens what little trust we have.”

Mij lifted a brow. “You think there’s trust left to weaken?”

“That’s not the point,” Vexa cut in, crisp. “Trust or not, we meet our obligation to the Runi’oyay’dinuir’s care.” She tapped her datapad. “I’ll adjust his schedule for physiotherapy. Mornings. Supervised. It won’t disrupt integration timelines.”

“‘Integration,’” Cody echoed, low. “That what we’re calling this?”

Silence held for a beat.

Jango didn’t look away from the scans. “Treat him with care,” he said at last. “No coddling—but I don’t want this escalating to further injury.”

No one argued.

“If this is mishandled, if his condition deteriorates again, the next meeting will not be a calm one.” He stood. “I’ll be present for prep. Full compliance with protocol. No deviation.”

“Understood,” Tarla said, unblinking.

“First light,” Jango said. “Full sedation. Two guards inside. Vexa or Mij present. Non-negotiable.”

“I’ll be there,” Vexa said.

Jango turned to Cody. “Why didn’t you catch his injuries and report them a long time ago? We might have been able to plan a remedy long before we took him into custody.”

Cody didn’t flinch. “Because he’s Obi-Wan Kenobi, sir. He hid it. Like he always does.”

Jango studied him for a long moment. “You admire him,” he said, then pointed to the glass. “But he was never your general.” His voice locked. “Remember who you are.”

Night-cycle hadn’t fully lifted when the chime sounded. The door opened a span.

“Obi-Wan,” Vexa said from the threshold, neutral. “It’s time for surgery. You can walk with me, or I can call a stretcher. Which do you choose?”

“No,” he said, flat. “I already told you to tell Jango no.”

A pause. “Acknowledged,” Vexa replied. “We’ll take this to the theatre. Jango is there; you can discuss it directly.”

He picked his battle and walked. Being manhandled would be worse. If he arrived on his feet—compliant enough to talk—perhaps the man would listen.

Inside the clear-walled operating room, Tarla waited with her tray. Cody stood off to the side, helmet on, hands visible. Jango was beside him; their low conversation died as Obi-Wan approached.

When Vexa keyed the door, Obi-Wan stopped in the frame. It felt like a trap. Still, he entered. The door hissed closed behind him. He bowed, just a fraction. “Mand’alor Fett. Might I request a word?”

Jango had expected it. “Very well, Obi-Wan. Speak with me.”

He stepped away from Cody. Obi-Wan joined him. It felt exposed—one hand newly knit, the other banded with a suppressor that smothered him behind a wall of silence. He stopped two meters away… close enough to be heard, far enough not to be crowded.

Jango didn’t give him the opening. “This is non-negotiable,” he said, even. “Your clavicle and ribs have healed wrong. Your ankle isn’t as bad, but we’ll repair it while we’re here. That pain you’re carrying? It will worsen. It will slow you, shorten you, make you easier to break. I will not leave you that way.”

“I don’t consent,” Obi-Wan said.

“I’m not asking for consent,” Jango answered, steady. “I’m asking you not to spend your strength fighting a thing that only hurts you to resist. If you fight, they’ll restrain you. You’ll wake sorer. You’ll trust us less. You’ll lose, and you’ll pay for losing with your body.”

Obi-Wan’s jaw worked. “Spare me the mercy.”

“This isn’t mercy,” Jango said. “It’s maintenance. Care, not indulgence. You need to breathe without guarding and move without compensating. You hate the suppressor? Fine. I’m not taking your spine too.”

Silence stretched. Tarla didn’t speak. Vexa waited, a fixed point at his flank.

Obi-Wan glanced at the bed. Too clean. Too bright. “Terms,” he said at last. “If you’re going to violate me, you’ll do it by rules.”

Jango nodded once. “Name them.”

“No restraints unless I become a danger,” Obi-Wan said. “You narrate every touch. Minimal drugs. No one grabs my wrist. And you—” a flick of his eyes to Jango “—you stay where I can see you.”

“Agreed,” Jango said without hesitation. “No restraints unless necessary. Everything named before contact. Planned anesthesia only. No one touches your suppressor side. I’ll be in view the entire time.”

Obi-Wan held his gaze a long moment, then exhaled through his nose. “Fine.” He moved to the bed, drew a slow breath, and sat.

Jango tipped his chin to Tarla. “Proceed.”

Tarla didn’t move until she met Obi-Wan’s eyes. “Permission to place monitors?”

“Yes,” he said, tired.

“Touching your forearm,” she said, then clipped the leads. “Cuff, upper arm.” A clean wrap. “Pulse oximeter, index finger.” Each contact named before it landed.

He lay back on his own, the linen cool against his shoulder blades. A blanket settled over his legs, and the weight helped—as if the fabric were beskar.

Mij approached with the IV. Tarla set her hand in his line of sight instead of on him. “Mask induction,” she said, lifting it so he could see the seal. “Sedative gas. I’ll count your breathing. If you need me to pause before you sleep, say so.”

He didn’t look at Jango again. “Get it over with.”

The mask lowered. Cold. Antiseptic.

“Breathe in for four,” Tarla said, calm as a metronome. “Out for four. Again.”

The sterile sweetness flooded his lungs.

The ceiling narrowed to a tunnel of light.

The room went away.

Chapter 11: Recovery

He woke to an ache radiating from his bones, heat spreading outward until he wished he'd stayed unconscious. It hurt to breathe; when he tried to lift his arm his shoulder answered with a concave burst of pain. The Force was still a dead star, offering nothing. Instinct reached for it anyway whenever the pain flared, and every time his hand closed on silence. A buzz threaded his ear while hands checked his pulse and a voice asked him to open his eyes, to take deep breaths. He didn't want to.
"Pain control?" someone offered.
He opened his eyes.

Tarla came into focus. "Repairs complete. Alignment good. Pain will spike with movement; we'll manage it. Physiotherapy begins in forty-eight hours. Mornings. Supervised."
He didn't know if she was speaking to him. Vexa answered, cool as glass. "Affirmative."
He blinked once. Vexa didn't force words.

Tarla handed him off to two nurses and gave a small bow. "Heal well, Runi'oyay'dinuir," she said, sincerely. "I'll review you in a few weeks in your apartments." A nod for Vexa, and she was gone.
A nurse injected something into the line at his arm. Cool spread outward; the pain slid down to something gloriously less.
They tried to keep him with them—"Another breath for me"—and he did, just to make them stop talking.
A monitor chirped.
"He can be moved from recovery," one said.
He opened his eyes. Did that mean he got to sleep again?

Vexa stepped closer, hands empty. "You can ride or walk with support. Choose."
"Ride," he rasped. Did they want thanks for pretend choices?
"Logged."

They moved without chatter. Guards he hadn't noticed fell in. With the nurses, Vexa, and Cody, it became a procession.

Back in his medical room, the lights were low. Fresh water on the rail. A single slip of paper on the bedside table.
Breathe. In fours.
No signature.

He lay back and let the ceiling blur. The pain was honest. The leash was still a leash. The hinges would still be there tomorrow.
He slept.

6 Days Later

Jango watched the surveillance from Obi-Wan's room again. He swallowed. The red streak across the transparisteel looked obscene against the muted colours beyond the dome. Obi-Wan's eyes had gone wide, then dull.
Vexa and Cody's intervention had been necessary. The guards had been a little too rough when they'd dragged him up from the floor; that could be corrected. He'd already flagged the footage for review.
Vexa had managed his Runi'oyay'dinuir well. Sometimes loosening your grip lets you take a better hold. Something she seemed to grasp.

He queued orders with his thumb against the desk sensor.
Facilities: install a striking post and a weighted sand trough in the training room; padded mitts, no hard edges. Leave the window intact. He needs a horizon.
Medical: osteo-repair complete; no sedatives unless Vexa authorises. Monitor for self-harm risk without treating him like a prisoner. Dignity is a constraint.
Security: no one takes his wrist without verbal consent unless he's actively bleeding out. If he refuses care, escalate through Vexa, not hands.

He scrubbed back and froze the frame where Cody reached instinctively for the suppressor side. His own fingers twitched. The first snap of beskar around that pulse—necessary, ugly. He wouldn't apologise for it. He would make it worth it.

"Rook," he said into the comm, "schedule a brief with Vexa and Cody in one hour. I want a revised calm-protocol for the Runi'oyay'dinuir—contain without touch wherever possible."
A beat. "And have Kira adjust his schedule. Add supervised kata in the training chamber once Mij clears the hand. He needs an outlet I don't have to drug."

He opened a sealed file and skimmed the names he'd promised himself not to hand over yet. Too much leverage to give away at once. He locked it again.
"Draft a message," he added. "To Kenobi. 'You broke skin, not glass. There are better things to hit. Use them.'"
He considered, then deleted the signature. Let him guess.

Jango sat back, watching the red smear glow in the feed's sterile light. Then he closed the window and rose. He'd give Obi-Wan the room to steady himself—and the exact tools to do it his way.
Choice was a leash. He intended to use it well.

Rook had the room ready: plain table, three chairs, a muted holoscreen looping stills from the incident. Vexa arrived first, posture neat as a blade. Cody came in seconds later, helmet under one arm, expression locked down.
Jango didn't sit.
"Review is done," he said. "Now we change the playbook."

He toggled the holoscreen to the frame where Obi-Wan's blood smeared across transparisteel.
Cody's jaw flexed. Vexa's eyes didn't move.
"Principle one," Jango said. "Contain without touch if at all possible. Words first. Every time."
His gaze tracked to Cody. "And this is not a debate."
Cody gave a single nod.

"Touch is permitted only under four conditions," Jango went on, crisp and measured. He lifted a gloved finger with each clause. "One: imminent danger to self or others. Two: an escape attempt or contact with an unauthorised party. Three: refusal to comply with critical schedule items after two clear directives and one final warning. Four: refusal of necessary medical care when delay increases risk."
He let that hang.

"In all cases," Jango added, "you attempt verbal de-escalation first. If the situation can be remedied with words, it will be. No exceptions."
Vexa inclined her head. "Acknowledged."

"Protocol when touch is required," Jango said. "Announce. Ask. Act. Announce intent by name, state the reason, and offer a choice. Count three. If he refuses and risk remains, act—clean, controlled, minimum force."

He clipped through the next points like loading a rifle.
"Hands off the suppressor side. No grabbing wrists unless he's actively harming himself or someone else. Prefer upper arms or a torso harness if you must engage. No shoulder pats. No familiarity."

Cody's stare didn't flicker, but he shifted his weight a fraction. Jango took it.
"Which brings us to tone." His voice cooled. "Retire the friendship, Commander. That performance served its purpose. You are Head of Security now. Address him as 'Runi'oyay'dinuir' or 'Obi-Wan', not 'sir,' not 'General.' No back-slapping, no reminiscing, no gallows jokes. Professional distance, every hour."
"Understood," Cody said, clipped.

"Documentation," Jango continued. "Bodycam on for any physical contact. Log who authorised, why, what verbal steps preceded it, and duration. Vexa is the authorising authority for non-red events. Red-zone emergencies—bleeding out, choke, weapon—anyone acts, then reports."

"Medical," he said, switching focus. "Sedatives only on Mij's order with Vexa's concurrence, unless red-zone. Anxiolytics and pain control are fine. The fresher remains unsurveilled unless crisis, but we monitor ingress/egress."

He looked back to the frozen frame of Cody's hand hovering near the suppressor. "Stop going for his wrist," Jango said, quiet now. "That's where the betrayal sits. You trip that wire, you own the fallout."
Vexa's mouth tightened in approval.

“Environment,” Jango said. “He needs an outlet. Facilities have installed a striking post with a weighted base and a sand trough. Padded mitts only. No hard edges in that room. Training starts when Mij clears the hand. Guards hold a two-metre perimeter at forty-five-degree arcs, hands visible, silent presence unless commands are required.”

He toggled a slate on the table; a simple ladder appeared.
“Privilege ladder,” he said. “Compliance earns more time in the training room, supervised self-directed study, terrace hours. Non-compliance narrows the day; it does not become deprivation. We don’t humiliate. We don’t starve. We don’t play quiet-cruel.”

Vexa glanced to the slate. “De-escalation language?”
Jango nodded. “Scripted lines only. Neutral voice. No sarcasm, no goading, no philosophy. You are not there to win an argument; you are there to hold the line. Use his name. Keep it precise: ‘Obi-Wan, I see you’re hurt. I want to help. We can walk to medical or I can call a stretcher. Which do you choose?’”

He shut the holoscreen.
“One last point,” he said. “No one touches him to comfort him. If he asks for space, you give it—inside safety parameters. Choice is leverage; we’ll use it.”

He looked to Cody. “You have opinions?”
Cody’s voice was flat. “We need a code word he can use to pause contact—one word that freezes hands unless red-zone.”
Vexa nodded. “Agreed. He responds to clear structure.”
“Good,” Jango said. “Set it. ‘Hold’ will do.”
Vexa logged it. “Understood.”

“And if any guard ‘gets a little too rough’ again,” Jango finished, iron under velvet, “you pull their feed, write them up, and I will reassign them to an Outer Rim ore station before their shift ends. We are not savages.”

He finally sat. “Execute.”
Vexa rose. Cody followed. No one offered a hand. No one tried for a smile.
The door sealed on a new protocol.

The next morning

Obi-Wan was just coming out of the fresher when a note slid under the door. He picked it up, turned it over. No signature.
Use the bag.

He stared at it for a breath, suspicious of anything so simple. Then he glanced to the corner node—steady blue—and to the new item in his schedule blinking on the wall: Training Chamber — 30 minutes, supervised. Mij had cleared his hand for light work that morning:

osteo-knit complete, wrapped for protection, avoid impact with bare skin. He heard Mij's voice again, maddeningly bland: "If you must strike, strike properly."

He didn't answer the chime. He didn't need to. When Vexa keyed in, the door opened a span and stopped.
"Training room is prepped," she said from the threshold. "Mitts and wraps provided. Water on the rail. I'll be present in the gallery. Guards will remain nearby but won't engage unless you ask for intervention or breach safety."
Her tone held no triumph, no coaxing. Just the facts.

"And if I decline?"
"You may decline," she said. "The room will remain available in your schedule."

He almost laughed. As if they were making it his decision… an illusion at best.
"Very well," he said, because the anger in his bones had nowhere to go except back into him, and he was tired of being his own anvil.

The chamber was clean and plain. A free-standing striking post on a weighted base, wrapped in dense fabric. A sand trough alongside, raked flat. On a small shelf: cotton wraps, padded mitts, a towel. No cords. No buckles. No edges he could turn into a tool.

Through the upper gallery glass, Vexa stood with a datapad, a silhouette rather than a presence. Two guards waited nearby, relaxed stances, watching.

He wrapped his hands with slow, precise movements despite the fresh knit's ache, the old ritual sliding back into fingers that remembered discipline when the Force would not answer. Breath in. Wrap the wrist. Across the knuckles. Anchor. Again.

When he slid the mitts on, the weight settled his thoughts by half a degree.

He approached the post and paused, hovering on the fringe of contact. In the glass, Sundari's skyline caught the light. He found the red smear in memory, not here; someone had already polished it from his window. He hated that he missed it, as if proof of feeling were more real than the feeling itself.

He hit the bag.
Not hard. A measured jab. Then another. Testing alignment. Breath on four counts out, two in, let the shoulders hang, don't lock the elbow. Pain flared along knitting bone and then faded to an honest throb.

He worked the simplest combinations first—jab, cross, step off-line; jab, cross, hook; guard back—keeping his stance tight, keeping his mind inside the mechanics. Fifteen strikes. Thirty. He bled the first layer off: the nausea, the heat under the skin, the go-for-the-window impulse that had crept in last night like a thief.

He wasn't alone; even with the Force silent he felt eyes on him from the gallery. He tried to ignore it. He suspected Vexa enjoyed command more than performance; she didn't interrupt —mercy or strategy, he couldn't tell. He catalogued it and kept moving.

The post thudded under a right cross that he maybe, almost, enjoyed.

He rolled his wrists, shook his arms, and swore softly when the wrap tugged at healing skin. He adjusted grip and took the angle, driving a tight left hook that snapped the bag a handspan. Not glass, he thought, and loathed the echo of the note in his head.

He moved into kata without thinking—the familiar lines of Temple forms translated down into human limits. Breath replaced current. Alignment replaced flow. He couldn't feel the Force, but he could still obey the body well enough to look like a man who could.

After ten minutes, his lungs steadied. The roar inside quieted to a workable hum.

On the rail, a second note waited beside the water bottle he was sure hadn't been there when he came in.
He didn't see who left it. Of course he didn't.
He pulled the mitt off with his teeth, unfolded the slip.
You broke skin, not glass. There are better things to hit.

He exhaled, something like a laugh catching in his throat and dying there. He looked up toward the gallery. Vexa didn't move. If she'd delivered it, she hid it well. If Cody had tried, he was learning restraint.

Obi-Wan set the note back on the rail and turned away from it like it was a cliff edge. He went back to the bag and worked until the wrap felt tight in a good way and the ache in his hand registered as proof of intention rather than evidence of collapse.

When the door opened at the twenty-eight-minute mark, it was Ren, not Cody or one of his men. He remained outside the threshold, hands visible, voice neutral.
"Two minutes to close, Runi'oyay'dinuir. Would you like the next session kept on your schedule?"
Obi-Wan swallowed and nodded once. "Yes."
"Logged," Ren said. "Water will be refreshed." He nodded at someone out of view and left.

Obi-Wan finished with a slow series—tap, breathe, tap—until the internal quiver subsided. He stripped the mitts and rewound the wraps, leaving the shelf as he'd found it.

Vexa arrived and reminded him he had lunch, then he would meet his head tutor for introductions and expectations—which Obi-Wan knew meant compliance. After that he had another session of Religious Fanaticism 101, courtesy of the Mand'alor. At least he'd pummelled out a lot of his feelings now. He'd be less likely to do something stupid later… like attempt to pummel them out on Jango's obnoxiously large bantha-dung-filled skull.

Chapter 12: Choreography

Obi-Wan was surprised when Boil joined them for lunch. He and Vexa had mostly eaten in silence since the surgery. Loneliness by design; Vexa dealt in plans, not conversation. Still, he wasn't sure he wanted one of his men here.

Boil nodded as he sat. "Good afternoon, sir—"

Vexa didn't look up. "You were briefed on the new protocol, Trooper. Address him as Obi-Wan or Runi'oyay'dinuir. Infraction logged. Repeat it and your visiting privileges are revoked."

Boil's jaw worked. "Right. I was—sorry. Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan inclined his head. "Good afternoon, Boil."

Boil brightened, and Obi-Wan cringed inwardly. This wasn't camaraderie; it was choreography.

"I hope you're settling in," Boil tried. "Found the meditation alcove?"

"What would be the point?" Obi-Wan lifted his wrist. The thin band bit cool against his skin. "I find I've lost the habit of peace."

Boil blinked. "The books, then? A bunch of the men made suggestions for things you might like. There should be some good ones in there."

Obi-Wan didn't suck in a breath, he didn't gasp, he held it in but the room tilted. The rooms had been prepared well in advance. Of course they'd all known long before the day... the day of the genocide. His hands shook as he pushed back his chair. "I rather find I've lost my appetite."

Vexa set down her utensils. "You may finish here, or I'll have your lunch sent to your rooms. Which do you choose?"

For a heartbeat he considered throwing the plate. Watching it smash into the wall or even better one of the faces staring back at him. He didn't. He looked at Boil instead, voice soft with a razor's edge. "I will never be your General again, nor a warrior you intend to treat with respect. That is, in part, your doing. If you think to visit me again, don't."

Boil exhaled, disappointed… tired. "You feel that way now. In time you'll see this was for the best. No one's saying you're not capable. But when given choices, you never choose yourself." A beat. "The Mand'alor will. Every time."

Obi-Wan snorted. "You're all delusional."

He chose the tray to his rooms and left without another word.

Vexa didn’t speak until the door sealed.

She logged the time, the choice, the exit. “Lunch: incomplete. Location: rooms. Trigger: premeditation cue.” She set the utensil down with care, as if precision could soak up the tension Boil had left behind.

Boil stood, hands laced behind his back like inspection. “That… could’ve gone better.”

“It could have gone worse,” Vexa said. “You did not attempt familiarity by touch. You complied when corrected.” She tapped the table pointedly. “And you revealed the problem.”

Boil frowned. “Which is?”

“You tried to give him comfort,” Vexa said, eyes on her slate. “Comfort is not care.”

Boil’s jaw twitched. “He used to meditate between rotations. I thought—”

“You offered a tool he cannot use,” Vexa said, calm as a metronome. “It reads as mockery even when it isn’t. You then told him the books were chosen by ‘the men.’ You confirmed long premeditation. You made the betrayal bigger.”

Boil flinched, barely. “I was trying to… show we were thinking of him.”

“He heard: we were planning this while you trusted us.”

Silence stretched. The air recycler hummed.

Vexa turned the slate so he could see the bullets populating in neat lines.

- Address drift: **sir** → corrected.
- Autonomy frame: **Which do you choose?** observed.
- Premeditation cue: ‘the men’ → tremor, appetite drop, exit.
- Outcome: withdrawal, hostility verbal only. No escalation.

“You were permitted to visit because you know his cadence,” Vexa said. “You can see small shifts before others do. Use that for data, not absolution.”

Boil stared at the tabletop. “He thinks I don’t respect him. That I wanted this.” He blew out a breath. “Maybe I wanted him alive more than I wanted him happy. That counts as wanting this, doesn’t it.”

“It counts as a choice,” Vexa said. “Make better ones in the room.”

He nodded once. “Coach me,” he said, and immediately regretted it.

“Next time,” Vexa said, “no history, no ‘we.’ No gifts with sentiment. You will not reference anything prepared ‘for him.’ You will cite the schedule only.” She ticked items off with a finger. “One neutral observation. One bounded choice. One predictable exit.”

Boil’s brow creased. “Example.”

“Observation: ‘Your wrap looks tight; Mij cleared light work.’ Choice: ‘We can walk two circuits of the corridor or sit ten minutes by the window. Which do you choose?’ Exit: ‘I’ll leave at fourteen hundred.’ Then you leave at fourteen-oh-two having completed hand off to the appropriate staff member.”

Boil swallowed. “And if he calls me out again?”

“You acknowledge the feeling without debate,” Vexa said. “You do not argue ethics at lunch. If he insults you, you log tone and you keep the boundary.”

Boil’s mouth twitched. “You think he’ll ever stop hating us?”

“I don’t care if he hates you,” Vexa said, finally meeting his eyes. “I care if he eats, sleeps, and doesn’t bleed on transparisteel again. And I care if he follows the schedule without force.” A fractional pause. “Dignity is a constraint. Remember that.”

Boil nodded, chastened but not crushed. “Permission to try again?”

“Conditional,” Vexa said. “You will study the de-escalation script and the privilege ladder. You will not use ‘sir,’ ‘General,’ or ‘old times.’ You will keep your visit to seven minutes and you will not improvise.” She tapped the slate. “You will also stop seeking absolution from him. That is not his job.”

Boil’s mouth pressed flat. “Logged.”

Vexa resumed her meal, then added, almost as an afterthought, “He tests edges in silence, not noise. If he goes quiet, widen your perimeter, not your volume.”

Boil absorbed that, then nodded again. “Understood.”

“Good.” Vexa flicked the visit request to **pending**. “Fourteen hundred. Gallery presence only.”

Boil’s eyes flicked to her. “If he doesn’t pick either choice?”

“Offer the third—per your brief,” Vexa said. “Do not frame options as indulgence. Offered choice stabilizes compliance.”
On her slate, she added a private note: *Do not use ‘illusion’ language in-room.*

Boil’s mouth quirked despite himself. “Right.”

He picked up his helmet, set it under his arm. “For what it’s worth,” he said, not looking at her, “I do respect him.”

“Then do the work that looks like respect,” she said. “On time. Without nostalgia.”

Boil inclined his head. “Understood.” He turned to go.

“Boil,” Vexa said.

He paused.

“You’re not here as his brother-in-arms,” she said. “You’re here as part of his household. Adjust.”

“Logged,” he said softly, and left.

Ready Room

The security ready room smelled like solvent and hot plastiform. Helmets lined the rack; bodycams blinked a steady blue. Boil paced a groove between the bench and the door, hands clenched behind his back so he wouldn’t tear at the velcro on his gloves.

“She’s a machine,” he said at last. “Cold-rolled beskar in a braid. You talk, she logs. You breathe wrong, she logs. I say ‘sir’ out of habit and suddenly my ‘visiting privileges’ are a line item.”

Waxer didn’t look up from rewrapping his hand tape. “You did say ‘sir.’”

“It slipped.”

“It slipped loud,” Waxer said, mild. “The mics picked it up.”

Boil glared at the floor. “That’s my point. Everything’s mics. Everything’s slate. We used to eat chow and talk like people.”

Cody set his helmet on the table with a dull thud and keyed through a feed. “We used to be at war,” he said. “Different playbook.”

“This still feels like war,” Boil muttered. “Just… a front with furniture, who’d have thought that would feel so bad?”

Waxer glanced at Cody. “He’s wound up.”

“I can hear him,” Cody said.

Boil stopped pacing. “She told me comfort isn’t care. Like I don’t know the difference.” He jabbed a finger at nothing. “I was trying to give him something positive to talk about… She called it ‘premeditation cues.’ Made it sound like I’d put razorwire in the stew.”

Cody flipped to a still: a smear of dried red across transparisteel, the city's glare beyond. He didn't turn it around. "You didn't give him something positive though," he said. "You gave him proof we planned this for an extended time. That's how he read it."

Boil's mouth flattened. "So we're just… technicians now. Scripts and ladders and gallery presence. 'Which do you choose,' like we're vending meals."

"The script works," Waxer said. "He took the tray to his rooms instead of throwing it."

"Because Vexa was sitting there like a statute of limitations."

"*Statue,"* Cody said without looking up.

"Whatever."

"Contain without touch isn't poetry," Cody added. "It's the difference between a clean transfer and an escalation."

He pointed to the still again. "Dignity reduces incidents. Therefore dignity is a constraint we hold… as long as his behaviour allows."

Boil's throat worked. He looked away. "He hates us."

Waxer set the tape aside and leaned back, elbows on knees. "He hurts," he said. "Hate talks first when hurt is busy."

Boil huffed a laugh with no humour. "You get that from a poster?"

"From being shot at by people who loved us yesterday," Waxer said. "Listen. Vexa's not a machine. She's a metronome. We're the ones who can't keep time."

Boil rubbed his face. "I told him the Mand'alor will choose him every time," he muttered. "It sounded better in my head."

"It sounded like a verdict in his," Cody said. "He heard: you don't get to choose yourself; we'll do it for you."

"That's not what I meant."

"It's what landed."

Silence stretched. Air recycler hummed.

Boil sank onto the bench. "He looked at me like I'd spit in his food. I wanted to explain." He glanced up, raw. "I wanted to tell him we burned the chips, that the oath was our choice, that we're getting names on deeds and wages that aren't ration cards. That this isn't slavery with nicer sheets. That I—"

Cody lifted a hand. "Not your job," he said. "Not now. He doesn't need history from you. He needs consistency from us."

Waxer nudged Boil's boot with his own. "You can still respect him," he said. "It just looks like: be on time, say his name right, and leave when you said you would."

Boil barked a small, miserable laugh. "Respect is boring."

"Good," Cody said. "Boring is safe."

A chime blinked in the corner: **T–00:05 — Gallery Presence**.

Cody stood. "Run it," he said. "Observation, choice, exit."

Boil rose too, picked up his helmet, then paused. "What if he asks me why?" he blurted. "Why we did it. Why we lied. Why—"

"'I can't discuss that,'" Cody said, flat. "Script. Then you log the question and leave at fourteen-oh-two."

Boil grimaced. "You going to watch me fail?"

"Every second," Cody said. It wasn't cruel. "Bodycam on."

Waxer clapped Boil's shoulder and let it sit there one heartbeat, long enough to anchor, not long enough to read as comfort. "You won't fail," he said. "You'll follow a list."

Boil blew out a breath. "Right. List." He slid the helmet on; the seal hissed, and the world narrowed to HUD and heartbeat. "Copy. Runi'oyay'dinuir. Seven minutes. No nostalgia."

He started for the door, then hesitated. "If he asks for me again, after this… does that mean anything?"

"It means he used the schedule," Cody said. "That's a start."

Boil nodded once and went.

Waxer watched the door close. "He'll keep calling her a machine," he said.

Cody picked up his own helmet. "He can call her a thunderhead for all I care," he said. "As long as he keeps time." He slid the helmet on. The ready room lights reflected off the visor, clean and cold.

They filed out toward the gallery, boots in step with the metronome.

Chapter 13: School Days

Sundari—Manda'urman'yam, Ba'jur'yaim
Ahsoka

Moving the sensitives to Manda'yaim was politics first. With the capital here, it fit. Better yet, it cut them off from Jedi muscle memory. Even with new doctrine, the old temple was a mausoleum—rooms whispering the past. The young ones didn't need it.

She welcomed the change. Jango ordered the Coruscant temple stripped. Maul's crew cracked every lock: relics, texts, files—everything. When they were done, it would reopen as a museum. The winners' story, and only that. The Jedi as villains; the massacre recast as courage. If that lie bought a quiet galaxy, she would live with it.

The new Manda'urman'yam wasn't ready, so they were camped in an old ba'jur'yaim for now. Soon, teams would range out again; finding Manda'ad'ika across the stars and bringing them home to train. One day they would serve their Mand'alor, keeping his galaxy settled.

But the Manda'ad'ika were hurting. Many had seen the slaughter, rounded up and locked in their sleeping halls too late to miss the blood. Those already inside felt it anyway. Their crèche-masters surrendered to spare them. The young ones watched as their carers were led outside. Moments later, the children felt them go… one by one, executed.

One of the advantages of it being a Mandalorian ba'jur'yaim was that it was set up for training already. She had a class of the older ade with her. It wouldn't help them to sit around and mope. So, they would train.

Ahsoka stood in the centre with a baton across her palms. She felt the absence like a scar: the Force was a steady river here, but not for everyone. Not for the ones wearing bands. They were here by choice. Here to teach despite the harsh penalties of their pasts.

"Eyes up," she said, voice carrying without a shout. "Today's sequence is simple. We're learning a three-step. Name. Place. Direct."

Two dozen watched her. Some scowled. Some watched the door. Two held hands too tightly. A Mandalorian instructor, Kel Vren, took a back wall and didn't fidget. He didn't need to. His presence did the work.

Yoda sat on a low bench near the doorway, his cane laid across his knees, a slim beskar band bright on his wrist. He looked smaller without the presence Ahsoka remembered. Something he had given up by choice when he had heard the alternatives. He caught her eye and gave the tiniest nod: proceed.

Ahsoka spun the baton once and set it against her shoulder. "Name: say what the feeling is. Not a story about it. One word. Place: point to where it lives in your body. Direct: choose what you'll do with it for the next five breaths." She gestured to the painted circles. "We train in threes."

A hand shot up. Tib, ten, human, angry since the day he'd been pulled from a smoke-stained dormitory. "What if the feeling is 'I want to break everything,'" he said flatly. "Is that a word?"

Ventress's voice cut in from the archway, amused and sharp. "Two, actually." She walked in with that predatory grace Ahsoka used to hate and had learned to trust… black leathers traded for a slate tunic with a simple belt. Her hair was shorn close; at her hip, a training saber hilt slept and stayed that way.

Ahsoka didn't look away from Tib. "Good question," she said. "I'll take it."

She stepped into one of the painted circles. "Name: rage," she said. "Place: chest." She tapped sternum with two fingers. "Direct: three clean strikes to the post, then ten slow breaths." She glanced at Tib. "That's one option."

Ventress drifted to the sand trough and picked up a short staff, testing the balance. "Another option," she said lightly, "is precision." She looked to Yoda for a nod; got it. "Name: grief. Place: back of the throat." She touched the hollow there. "Direct: teach your muscles a line that your feelings can't ruin."

Then she moved. Not fast. Exact. A measured diagonal that drove the sand back without spray. She set the staff down as if it were something sacred and turned her gaze on Tib. "Messy is easy," she said. "Control is the art."

A boy in a half-helm muttered, "Mando words for Jedi rules."

Yoda's ears tilted, and for once he didn't cloak the rebuke in humor. "Jedi rules failed us when they turned to denial," he said, voice thin but steady. "A creed that calls breath weakness breaks its own students." He lifted his wrist, the band catching light. "Balance is practice, hm?"

Ahsoka caught the flinch that rippled through the benches at the sight of the band. She didn't soften it. They needed to see. "Feelings aren't enemies," she said, bringing them back to ground. "They're alarms. Directions. Fuel. We don't throw away fuel. We learn where to pour it."

Tib crossed his arms. "And what if my fuel wants the clones dead?"

Kel didn't move, but the air in the room tightened. Ahsoka felt her own jaw go taut, then released it. "Name," she said.

Tib glared. "Hate."

"Place."

He jabbed at his stomach.

"Direct."

"Punch something until it stops."

“Good,” Ahsoka said, and Tib blinked like he’d been slapped. “You named it without lying. Now the hard part. You can’t hit clones here. You can’t hit classmates. So your options are post, sand, breath, or journal.” She pointed with the baton. “Pick one.”

He hesitated just long enough for Ventress to arch a brow. “Which do you choose?” she asked, the phrase as stripped and neutral as a command board.

“Post,” Tib muttered.

He got his look at an out-of-bounds service halls after all. They ran deeper than he’d guessed; he’d already marked them as an escape route. However, he saw them only marched like a criminal. Which raised the better question: what else lay below?

He’d known for days he’d meet his “teachers” this afternoon. Vexa said there was a classroom. An actual classroom. He felt absurdly like a youngling being walked to school.

The service hall ran deeper than he’d guessed, it was the kind of corridor you only saw when someone else held the keys. Solvent and warm circuitry in the air. Two guards. Vexa ahead of him, pace even.

The classroom’s long wall threw his face back at him in flat silver. Observation glass. He couldn’t see in. No doubt that would be Vexa’s vantage point.

“Obi-Wan,” Vexa said, stopping him just inside the threshold. The door sealed behind with a soft clack, and a scanner in the frame sang one clean note as it read his suppressor band. “Rules for this room. Hands visible unless instructed. Remain seated once placed. No Force manipulation, though, your band and the field will make that a formality. You speak when addressed, or when given the floor. If you need something, ask.”

He inclined his head. “Understood.”

“Normally we don’t restrain you if we can help it,” she added, meeting his eyes, “but when your in this classroom that will be different. Your follow classmates are from your former life. Your attending alongside them is provisional. If it hinders instruction, we move your slot and you learn alone.”

He felt a rush in his chest, he wasn’t sure if he had heard her right? She had said his old life? Was he… did she mean Jedi? Others like Anakin? Ahsoka? He kept his face still and his hands open.

“Seat four,” Vexa said.

The chair was ordinary, except for the restraint that clicked over his hips. He swallowed… this was reminiscent of… he needed to focus on something else.

He looked around the room desperate for something to latch onto. He caught the sight of his own wild eyes staring back at him and was surprised by how wired he looked. It was a shock. He'd faced down war lords with confidence, defeated grievous with charm intact… the man in the reflection was not that man.

Vexa had left him and returned to the door. The door cycled. A soft chime. First through was Cin Drallig. The band scanner lit a cool blue across his wrist; the guard at his shoulder said, "Suppression green. Seal intact." Drallig's gaze mapped the room, seams, the mirrored wall, paused his gaze on Obi-Wan and then he sat where Vexa pointed.

"Seat one," she said. The locks took. He tested the give once, then went very still, hands flat on his thighs, eyes forward. Like a sword sheathed inside a chair.

The door again. Barriss Offee, they must have gotten her from prison, her eyes are down, steps measured. The scan chimed; the guard repeated the litany. "Seat two." She obeyed without looking left or right. The lock clicked. Her breath went shallow and high until she pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth and found a rhythm. Obi-Wan wouldn't turn down any ally, and while he disagreed with her actions he could see clearer now than ever as to why…

Mace Windu arrived like a verdict. The scan swept his band; he paused just long enough to glance at the glass and nod, once, a soldier acknowledging an audience, then, crossed to "Seat three" and sat. The lock was engaged. He didn't so much as flex against it. "Noted," he said, to the room, to the guards, to fate.

Quinlan Vos sauntered in and pretended it wasn't a saunter. "You redecorated," he said to no one in particular as the scan chimed. Vexa's eyes didn't move. "Seat five." He dropped into it, grin thinning as the locking mechanism clicked. The hum tickled. He lifted both hands, palms out. "See? Polite."

Plo Koon came next, the set of his shoulders speaking exhaustion and patience. The scan lit. "Seat six." He paused on the way past Obi-Wan, "we thought you were dead." He murmured to himself. He was seated and the lock took. He nodded once to Obi-Wan without looking at him directly, the way men greet each other across a battlefield without inviting fire.

Eeth Koth's jaw was already tight before he reached the threshold. The scanner tone brightened, and his mouth flattened. "Seat seven," Vexa said. The coupler snapped on; he bristled.

"Breathe," Windu said, not turning his head. "You lose nothing by sitting."

The bristle smoothed to a glare; then Koth exhaled and let the lock be what it was.

Vexa checked the dais. Tiny lines of text ticked green beside each name: identity, seal, suppression index, heart rate settling. She lifted her voice just enough to carry without echo.

“Roll call: Drallig. Offee. Windu. Kenobi. Vos. Koon. Koth.” Each name got a small acknowledgement: a nod, a blink, the barest tilt of fingers. “This is a controlled environment. Localised shields can be raised around any seat. Bands will rescan on interval. Speak when given the floor. If you require pause for regulation, say so. If co-attendance proves counter-productive, schedules will be separated. Questions?”

Quinlan lifted his hand lazily “I’m just wondering where you’ve been hiding Kenobi all this time?”

“Kenobi, has his own quarters, the reason for this will become apparent as you progress in your learning modules.”

Obi-Wan raised his hand and Vexa acknowledged him, he looked at her but was asking the others “have any of you seen Anakin or Ahsoka?”

Before anyone could reply Vexa answered “No talking amongst students. This is your first warning Kenobi, if you receive three you will be removed to a quiet room for the rest of the session.”

Quinlan raised his hand again and asked “Who are you again? Ahsoka didn’t mention you?”

Quinlan winked at Obi-Wan who blinked at his friend.

“First warning Vos.” Vexa said with a disappointed shake of her head “lets get through introductions with your instructors before we have any more.”

Obi-Wan didn’t care about warnings, or introductions or whatever else Vexa was droning on about. He cared about Ahsoka. She was alive… but not included in this class? Injured maybe? He worried. But clearly alive. If she was then perhaps Anakin was too.

Chapter 14: Manda's Sight

Kamino - The day they met

Rain hit Tipoca City in sheets, drumming the durasteel like fingers on a drumhead. Jango liked the sound: steady, predictable. Dooku had said the same of the timetable. Jango had been ready for months, contingencies nested three deep. Revenge wasn't heat; it was math.

The Kaminoans commed. *A Jedi has arrived, Master Fett.*

Good. A murder monk to test his patience and his skills. The Jedi would chase, and Jango would lead.

Before he could answer, a second light blinked on his wrist. Private channel. "Cody," Jango said.

"Prime," came the clipped reply. A pause, then, strangely: "The Jedi... He's… different."

"How?"

"Hard to define. Sir, he's..." Cody searched for language clones weren't built to need. "Glowing."

Jango's mouth tightened. "Report for diagnostics. If you're hallucinating, I want the cause isolated. If it's systemic—"

"It's not me," Cody said, sure.

The door chime sounded.

Jango set his helmet in place, let it seal with a hiss, and turned as the panel slid open.

The Jedi stepped in.

The world tilted.

Not literally; the floor stayed true, the rain kept time. But something inside Jango's chest slid into a groove he hadn't known was there. A second sense, old as prayer and twice as unwanted, lit like a blade catching sun. *Manda's sight,* some part of him named it, a memory he hadn't asked for.

Euphoria hit first—warm, bright, indecent. He almost staggered.

He didn't.

He locked it down where no one could see, let beskar hide the tell, and measured the man instead: pretentious, arrogant, with an annoying swagger and a mouth that knew how to smile as a weapon… a mouth he wanted to— He swallowed and forced himself to concentrate.

So. Cody wasn't failing.

Jango was marked.

"Master Jedi," he said smoothly, voice the only part of him he allowed to move. "To what do I owe the visit?"

The Jedi's gaze flicked up, veiled with polite interest. "Obi-Wan Kenobi. I'm here about an army."

Mine, the new sense answered, unbidden and absolute.

Jango smiled with his voice again. "So am I."

The door opened again and five Mandalorians entered and lined up behind Vexa.

"Welcome to the Integration Track, adult cohort," she said. "This room is for instruction, not debate. You are here under the Mand'alor's protection and the Manda's tide. You will learn the language, the customs, the record, the law, and the Way as they are lived. Your instructors will introduce their disciplines. You will listen."

She tipped her chin to the first figure.

"Ria Kote. Ba'jur Mando'a, — language."

Ria stepped forward in ink-marked cuffs, helm tucked under one arm. "Mando'a is not decoration," she said, smooth as chalk on slate. "It is how we bind reality to duty. When you say *mhi*—'we'—you take on weight. When you say *aruetiise*—'outsiders'—you set a boundary. Words are oaths you put in your own mouth."

Her gaze moved down the seated line. "I love this craft because it keeps our people coherent across storms and centuries. Dialects hold memory. Precision prevents lies. If you learn our words, you will stop speaking *about* us and start speaking *with* us."

She inclined her head once. "My hope for you is simple: that one day you earn *mhi* honestly. Under our great Mand'alor, the Manda has given you a second chance to choose your speech —and, by it, your allegiance."

Vexa tipped her chin again. "Harkan Rekor. Hearth and Field—culture, tradition."

Harkan's plates were scarred; he smelled faintly of spice and oil. "Culture is not a song we hum," he said, voice like a warm stove. "It's water and salt and who gets the first bowl. It's how we wear plates and how we take them off. Guest-right keeps knives sheathed; memorial rites keep ghosts fed. We show strength by what we sustain."

He set a folded cloth on the table as if laying a place. “I love this work because it turns creed into muscle memory. I have watched boys become men by learning to pass bread before boasting. I have watched enemies sit, eat, and stand up less likely to draw.”

He nodded once. “My hope for you: that you eat, sleep, and honor the *Resol’nare* until the habits make sense in your bones. The Manda has carried you to our hearth. Our Mand’alor keeps it lit. Sit properly, and live.”

“Mirdala Tor. History,” Vexa said.

Mirdala’s Protector pauldron caught no light; recording beads clicked softly when he breathed. “History is not comfort,” he said. “It is testimony. Intent is a diary. Outcomes are a census. We will read both.”

He let the words settle. “I love this discipline because it refuses flattery. It humbles victors and makes the dead speak. Here you will defend a timeline you dislike, and then you will swap and do it better. We will examine the Duchess’s peace and its costs, the Jedi’s guardianship and its failures, our own wars and the people who bled for our banners.”

A small breath. “My hope is that clarity replaces the stories that keep you from serving the present. Under our Mand’alor, the archive is open; under the Manda, the tide has turned. Learn why, so you don’t drown in yesterday.”

“Kara Deykar. Civics, Law, Justice & Strength.”

Kara’s matte plates read as verdict, not threat. “Law is how strength consents to be bound,” she said. “Strength without restraint is banditry. Restraint without strength is surrender. We practice the chain of command and the chain of care—together.”

She keyed a slate; statutes flickered and went dark again. “I love this field because process makes mercy real. You will argue cases you dislike, within rules that hold all of us—including the Mand’alor. You will learn *announce, ask, act.* You will learn guest-right, foundling rights, and the difference between punishment and consequence.”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “My hope is that you stand in our courts without flinching. The Manda has given you a second hearing. Our great Mand’alor has given you jurisdiction—life under law instead of life under whim. Use it.”

Vexa’s voice softened by a fraction. “Maev Vorpan, the Armorer—The Manda, the Way, prophecy, and our people.”

The gold-helmed Armorer stepped forward. Somewhere, metal sang; perhaps it was just the timbre of her voice. “The Manda is the people’s soul,” she said. “The Way is how we keep from spilling it. Ore resists until it remembers what it is. You will call the quench cruel. I call it becoming.”

She lifted a gloved hand as if weighing something unseen. “I love the forge because it tells the truth: heat reveals, pressure aligns, and what survives is useful. I will teach you the

Resol'nare as sacrament, foundlings as mandate, and why the tide corrected what it did. You may hate the chain. You will still wear it, until you learn to carry it."

Her helm tilted slightly toward the row… toward a particular seat, perhaps, or to all of them at once. "My hope is that you are tempered thrice: body, will, and choice, and rise serviceable to the people. The Manda has spared you. Our Mand'alor has claimed you. Live so that claim is not wasted."

Obi-Wan didn't get a chance to speak to any of the other Jedi before they were one by one taken away. When it was just him alone, he was escorted by Vexa and the guards back up to his prison. He was exhausted. Mentally wiped out.

Obi-Wan was led to the sitting room for another audience with the Mand'alor. He couldn't bear to sit and wait, so he drifted to the shelves and pretended to read spines. The words wouldn't stick. Without the Force, there was no ballast—just the low hum under his skin that made his hands want to do something, anything.

Vexa sat by the firepit, at ease with a datapad. Two guards held the door. Obi-Wan let his wandering bring him near enough to angle a glance at her screen.

"Step back or be seated. Which do you choose," one guard said, calm as a metronome.

Vexa's eyes lifted; she had him measured already.

"Terribly sorry if I've crossed some boundary," Obi-Wan murmured. "I was curious about the book titles on the far shelf."

"Which do you choose," Vexa repeated, unchanged.

He backed off. "As I said, I was just walking across the room." He moved on, studying a different shelf with studied interest. "Ah… yes."

She returned to her reading. He moved on to the window instead. Sundari sprawled beneath the dome, traffic streams braiding like light. He leaned his forehead to the transparisteel; the current thrummed back through bone. The restlessness crawled in his limbs, Jolty energy with no meditation to smother it.

"The Mand'alor appears to be late," he said at last. "May I return to the training chamber while we wait?"

"We follow the schedule," Vexa said. "That has been clear from your first day." She watched him a second longer, assessing, then offered the script: "You are agitated. I can call for tea, or we can review your schedule for a good slot to add more exercise when it is earned. Which do you choose?"

"I—"

The door seals whispered. Boots on stone. The room's temperature seemed to shift a degree.

Jango Fett entered without hurry, no helmet, relaxed in stance. Obi-Wan could see the danger under the façade. Jango killed without remorse, even his own people hadn't been safe. He remembered that moment when Fett killed the shapeshifter he'd hired. What for? to cover his tracks... or to lead a Jedi to Kamino? A sinking feeling disbalanced him again. That dart had been sloppy, and Jango was many things but he had never been sloppy. How had he only just... even before they'd met Jango had been manipulating him. He'd just been too blind to see it... arrogant.

“Kenobi,” Fett said with a tight smile, and the fire threw his shadow across the floor. Obi-Wan was still... he couldn't do this right now.

Chapter 15: Gifts

Chapter Notes

> Thanks everyone for all the support. I'm a lot nervous about this chapter. Can't work out if the flow is okay... can't workout if I made a bit of a mess of it. Please if you have any suggestions to make it better let me know and I can consider them. I always appreciate the help. The messy parts were meant to mirror Obi-Wans messy state but if it doesn't work please do let me know!

Ahsoka and Ventress sat in the terraced seating of the observation room. Obi-Wan was led in, and Ahsoka felt… guilty. He looked smaller than she'd ever seen him. A little hunched in his seat. His eyes found the mirrored glass of the observation room and widened.

"He can't see you," Ventress supplied as a reminder.

"I know." Ahsoka's voice was low. "It's strange seeing him again… the last time I saw him —"

"It was a different galaxy," Ventress finished. "And a different Kenobi."

Ahsoka nodded. "I miss him."

"Then mourn him now. Whatever he was to you before, that's gone. One of the consequences of your choices."

They both fell silent for a moment.

"It was the right choice," Ahsoka said at last… though inside, it felt more like a question she couldn't quite answer.

"I never said it wasn't," Ventress replied evenly. "Both of us did what we had to. Kenobi is an unfortunate casualty."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

"I don't know why." Ventress's eyes slid toward Ahsoka. "I like Kenobi. Always did. We had a lot of fun chasing each other across the galaxy."

Ahsoka blinked, surprised. "Really? I always thought he just took delight in frustrating you."

Ventress smirked. "Yes, he did. But he never came at me to kill. He could have, multiple times—he's shown himself willing to kill if the moment called for it. I like to think he liked me."

Ventress let her eyes settle on Obi-Wan, it was true that spark she'd always enjoyed appeared to have gone out.
"Besides… Kenobi was never much fun when he was brooding. At least now he has an excuse."

The Jedi were being brought in, including Obi-Wan's old friend Quinlan.

"That's the one you made a deal for?" Ahsoka asked curiously.

"I did." Ventress's tone had cooled.

Ahsoka raised a brow. "Must have been an easy sell, at least. He's one of Obi-Wan's oldest friends, isn't he?"

"He was."

"Everyone out," Jango said, eyes still on Obi-Wan, tracking the quick, shallow rise of his breath.

Obi-Wan, stubborn as ever, took that as invitation and moved to pass. Jango caught his forearm—above the suppressor—clean and deliberate. "Not you." The words were soft; his voice sat a note lower than usual.

Color climbed Obi-Wan's cheekbones. He hadn't braced for the sensation of Jango's hand on him; like before, heat ran down his spine in a betraying shiver. He tugged once, found Jango's grip like steel, and stilled. Jango almost smiled despite himself. Too easy to imagine that flush for an entirely different reason, those expressive eyes tilted up and waiting—

Kriff.

He let go. Obi-Wan stepped back at once, chin high.

"Did you enjoy your gifts?" Jango asked, easing against the door in a way that said without saying it: the only way out was through him.

Obi-Wan's mouth tilted. "Unlike you, the bag doesn't talk bantha fodder," he said. "Refreshing. Much more civilized."

His gaze slid to Jango's hand, then back to his face. "And the note?"

"You broke skin, not glass," Jango said mildly. "There are better things to hit."

“So it was you.” Dry as salt. “How thoughtful. Cages and enrichment toys.”

Jango showed a line of teeth. “And I’m allowing you to see some of your people. I was going to have you instructed alone.”

“And this meeting is you fishing for gratitude from your prisoner?”

Irritation licked up; he pressed it flat. “I have another gift. I think you’ll like it.”

“What?” Obi-Wan snarled. “Give me what you want, Jango. It won’t change what you’ve done.”

Jango stepped in; Obi-Wan stepped back. Jango smiled and did it again. Obi-Wan’s eyes searched the room, hunting for exits he didn’t have.

“I’ve decided to give you some—” Jango’s glance caught on the cut of the new tunic; it suited Obi-Wan far too well. “—power.”

That landed. Obi-Wan’s attention snapped to his face. He started to lift the banded wrist; hope, quick and bright flashed over his face. Jango realized dangling that word had been a mistake even as he enjoyed the softening of Obi-Wans features.

“Not that,” Jango said, lifting a hand and shaking his head once, regretful.

Obi-Wan’s restraint tore. He pivoted, snatched a book off the shelf, and drove at him.

He feinted left; when Jango reached for his upper arm, Obi-Wan slipped the take, cut to the opposite side, and smashed the book toward Jango’s head. Beskar met paper with a hard ring as Jango’s vambrace came up; pain jolted up Obi-Wan’s fingers and the book ripped free on the rebound, skittering across the floor.

He lunged after it—too late. Jango stepped off-line, caught him high on both biceps, and used Obi-Wan’s own momentum to swing him and plant him on the couch, away from the fire pit.

“Stand down,” Jango warned, holding only at the upper arms, letting Obi-Wan decide how much force this would take. “I only want to talk.”

“Fine. Talk.” Obi-Wan snapped his head back; Jango slipped it by a hair, only for Obi-Wan to scythe a kick that knocked Jango’s left foot off-line. Message received.

Jango reset and rose as Obi-Wan’s fist cut for his face. He parried, caught the non-banded forearm and shunted it wide while his other forearm dropped to jam the incoming knee. “Last warning,” he said, low.

Jango’s heart was pounding, adrenaline rising. Obi-Wan was beautiful when he fought; the lines of his tunic pulled taut over muscle, movement clean and precise, movement honed into muscle memory.

Even without the Force, he was good; grit like Mando’ade. Who needed dancing when a fight would serve as courtship? If only it were that simple. Longing hurt. Jango pushed it away.

They circled. Obi-Wan pressed; Jango gave inches, taking space, letting him burn through that sharp, furious energy. This wasn't a rush-job. Better to tire him out, then talk.

Obi-Wan's hair was mussed, his breath coming hard. He'd come in already tired; physio was helping, but years of compensations kept ghosting his stance. He didn't need to guard that clavicle anymore. He did anyway. Jango saw the hitch in the left shoulder, the fractionally short plant on the rebuilt ankle, openings he could take. He didn't.

Jango tapped the air near Obi-Wan's elbow, not touching. "Stop guarding what isn't broken."

Obi-Wan answered with a sharp three-beat, jab, cross, low kick. Jango parried, slid inside the line, caught him high on the arms, and set him back onto the couch; clean, controlled.

"I'm letting go," Jango said: announce, then act, and released.

Obi-Wan coiled to spring again.

"Your 'power,'" Jango said evenly, "starts with this: say 'Hold' and every hand in this room pauses. For now, mine included."

Obi-Wan's eyes flicked, doubtful. "Hold."

Jango stepped back two paces at once, palms open.

Obi-Wan stood "you think I care about that?" he nodded towards Jango "you think I don't know that its just another illusion? If I were to try walking out of here no amount of "hold" is going to stop them…"

"There are of course rules…"

Obi-Wan picked up the book from where it was still on the floor.

"Stand down Obi-Wan." Jango said firmly "we are going to have this talk no matter how long it takes or how badly you try and avoid it… you can sit back down or I can restrain you, which do you choose?"

"*Neither*!" Obi-Wan charged again.

Obi-Wan was out of control. He knew it. Jango knew it. But he couldn't seem to stop himself. It was like watching himself from a distance. He was being drowned, run by rage and grief alone and he had been lost in the waves of them.

He was screaming as he fought. And then wonderfully, finally his fist made contact with Jango's exceptionally hard skull… Jango went backwards and lost his footing, Obi-Wan ran to the door… he needed to get out. He had to get out. He needed to get out…

It was locked.

It was locked.

It was locked.

He turned back to find Jango watching him “Obi-Wan *stop*… before you hurt yourself again”.

Obi-Wan snarled and went for him again. For no reason. For every reason. Jango was too calm. Too in control. Too smug.

“Contact,” Jango said—announced—and slipped inside the arc. A forearm shunted Obi-Wan’s elbow; a hand caught high on his triceps. One turn, one step, and Obi-Wan went down onto the rug, Jango on top.

Obi-Wan couldn’t stop himself from thrashing and screaming. Roaring. Fighting. Shaking. Bucking. Losing.

Jango was calmly talking to him. Calmly holding him down. Obi-Wan wanted to smack him across the face but Jango held too firmly. He needed to hurt Jango, make him feel it, make him hurt. Everything was hot. Everything was wrong. He hated. He was crying. Trying not to. Desperate not to. He went limp. He was floating, He was limp. Jango was holding him. Lifting him into his arms on the ground. What was left?

“Please” he began begging “where’s Anakin, you said he’s safe… but he wasn’t there today…where?”

Jango sighed “You haven’t earned that information. I keep giving you choices and you keep choosing to rebel… when we don’t make good choices we…”

Obi-Wan screamed long and hard. A breathless scream of grief and he tried throwing himself sideways out of Jango’s arms. But Jango was immovable.

When Obi-Wan ran out of breath Jango pulled Obi-Wan closer still, Obi-Wan could feel his breath on his face, the pressure of his forehead resting on his own. “Count with me. In for four. Out for four.”

A strange calm fell over him. Peace, overcame him in waves. He was light. He was safe. He was content. Pleasant splatters of bright warmth spread from where their skin touched. A shared pulse thumped. Obi-Wan counted.

Jango lifted his head from contact with Obi-Wan and looked over his face, the tears, the quivering.

“This isn’t what I wanted… but we both know it’s all you’ll ever let me have” Jango whispered into Obi-Wans mouth. Their breaths shared. Jango’s mouth was on his then. Surprisingly soft lips pressed to his. Lightning strikes of warmth and trembling pulses of pleasure spread from his lips into the rest of his body. Jango moved up and kissed his nose, again warmth and pleasure… next his forehead. Obi-Wan closed his eyes.

Obi-Wan was only vaguely aware of being lifted and laid on the couch again, Jango sat down next to his head and started to gently stroke his hair while he stared off, drifting into a strange hazy nothing.

When Obi-Wan's breathing finally steadied into sleep, Jango rose from the chair. He crossed to the shelves, crouching at a low cabinet built flush into the wall. The lock accepted only his imprint; the panel lit green at the touch of his thumb.

Inside lay a neatly folded blanket and pillow. He took them out with the same deliberate care he reserved for weapons, then returned to the couch.

Obi-Wan didn't stir when Jango slid a hand beneath his head, lifting just enough to slip the pillow into place. A faint sigh escaped him as his weight settled back. Jango drew the blanket over him in one smooth motion, tucking it around his shoulders.

For a moment he lingered, fingers brushing against a lock of copper hair before he caught himself. His chest tightened with the sharp ache of a thought he rarely allowed: if the galaxy had been different; if either of them had been given the chance—maybe this could have been something real. But it wasn't. It never would be. This was all he was allowed.

He withdrew his hand, face already shuttered, and turned away to prepare for the next set of decisions waiting beyond the room.

Jango closed the door firmly behind him, leaving the guards to take their posts. Obi-Wan's ragged breathing was cut off with the sound of the seal.

Vexa was waiting, datapad ready, posture straight.

"He'll need to be examined," Jango said. "Mij can do it. Full scan; I want to know if he's aggravated anything."

"Of course," Vexa replied, fingers moving swiftly. Then, after a beat: "If Mij does find damage, we'll need to reconsider his schedule."

"That's my call," Jango said. "Mij will make his report directly to me. Ask him to also include the medication options he's prepared, Obi-Wan may need them after all."

"Understood," Vexa said, then glanced down at her notes. "With medication there's been some caution advised about early reliance."

Jango's eyes narrowed. "If the adjustment proves too sharp, we'll use what's necessary. Have Mij compile options. I'll decide."

Vexa inclined her head but didn't move on immediately. "I'll have him prepare two sets of recommendations; with and without medical intervention. It will give you clearer comparisons."

Jango gave the smallest grunt of approval. "Do that."

"Dinner?" she prompted.

“Postpone it. Two, three hours. He’s not fit to sit at the table, and I’m not finished with him.”

Vexa made the notation, then raised her gaze again. “Postponing may cause some speculation among the staff. Shall I frame it as a routine change?”

“Yes,” Jango said. “Make it sound deliberate.”

“And tomorrow?” Vexa asked.

Jango hesitated before replying. “Give him a later start. He needs the rest.”

Her brow furrowed slightly. “Mij did emphasize consistency. A shift might unsettle him further.”

Jango’s jaw tightened. “And a collapse in public would unsettle him more. I’ll handle the risk.”

Vexa absorbed that in silence before saying, “Then I’ll prepare contingencies. If he does falter, the schedule can be adjusted on the surface without appearing irregular.”

Finally, Jango allowed a flicker of satisfaction. “Good. See to it.”

Chapter 16: Disillusion

Jango watched Obi-Wan sleep. It was pleasant; like a long-forgotten feeling, like home. It pulled at memories of his early years, a life long dead. Yet here, in this room, with Obi-Wan, it felt… reclaimable.

The room was warm, the couch comfortable. This was a moment worth fighting for. He set his datapad aside entirely, content to admire Obi-Wan's form at peace. The soft rise of his chest, the faint snore; endearing in a way Jango hadn't expected.

It was in moments like this he could imagine they were a normal couple. His cyar'ika had dozed off on the couch, and he, the doting ridur, had draped a blanket over him before returning to his seat.

He let himself soak up the fantasy. Imagined Obi-Wan's eyes opening, a lazy smile curving his lips. *Hello, dear,* he'd say. Jango would smile back, cross the room, sit close. Obi-Wan would tease him gently, fondly.

He was deep in the vision, letting it warm him, when Obi-Wan stirred. The illusion cracked; Obi-Wan's face tensed as if he were in pain, tears wet his eyelashes, as he whimpered in his sleep.

Obi-Wan woke aching, body heavy with exhaustion. He didn't want to open his eyes.

"Master? Can you hear me?"

Anakin's voice echoed in his mind, and he forced his eyes open. He was in the Halls of Healing. Anakin stood at his bedside, worry etched across his face. Light streamed through tall windows as healers moved from cot to cot.

Obi-Wan sat up, reached for Anakin, gripped his arms, and fell forward into his chest. He sobbed, and Anakin murmured reassurances, rubbing his back. Obi-Wan cried harder—

—*and the voice changed.*

The warmth at his shoulders was wrong, too heavy. The scent of clean linen and temple air was gone, replaced by leather and oil. The light fractured: tall windows broke apart into firelight flickering across durasteel.

He opened his eyes.

He was on his side on the couch. And it was Jango's hand rubbing his back.

Obi-Wan scrambled back. “No,” he sobbed, shaking his head, desperate to recalibrate. He wiped at his face quickly, furious with himself for showing weakness.

“Obi-Wan. You’re okay.” Jango leaned back on his haunches, hands raised before lowering them slowly. “You’re in the sitting room. At home.” His voice was calm, soft, practiced.

Obi-Wan searched the room like a cornered animal. Then his gaze locked on Jango, sharpened, and caught the bruise on his cheek. A smile ghosted across Obi-Wan’s face as he nodded in Jango’s direction. “Nice bruise. You’re not as quick as you think you are.”

Illusion dead, Jango raised a brow. “Striking your Mand’alor, outside a spar, is a direct challenge to my power,” he said coldly. “Anyone else and I’d have run them through.”

Obi-Wan’s smile lingered, thin and bitter. “I wouldn’t be complaining,” he said. “At least that would be clean.” His eyes glittered as he raised the banded wrist. “Or you could take this off. Give me a fair fight. If I win, you let me go—unless you’re afraid.”

Jango snorted. “You’re not in control here.”

“I challenge you.” Obi-Wan’s tone sharpened, reckless. “Win or die—either works for me.”

Jango smiled, pleased despite himself. “You know something of our culture, then. Good.” He moved to the far side of the firepit, lounging back with deliberate ease. “But you don’t know enough to use it.”

Obi-Wan shoved aside the blanket and pillow, sneering. “How thoughtful. A blanket, a pillow—how civilized. One could almost believe you have a heart.”

Jango’s smile thinned, eyes narrowing. “You call it pretense. I call it proof. I’ve taken care of you before, Kenobi; whether you choose to admit it or not.” His tone softened into a dangerous purr. “Remember Dooku’s prison on—”

“Don’t!” Obi-Wan’s voice cracked, sharper than he intended. His whole body jolted with the words. “That was staged, you colluded with him, twisted everything. You made me think you could be trusted, even for a moment. Do you have any idea what that cost me?”

Jango tilted his head, unbothered, almost amused. “I seem to recall it worked.”

“Hold.”

Jango stilled, studying him.

“I just wanted to see if it would shut you the kark up,” Obi-Wan said flatly. “Now about that challenge; do I need to make it in front of witnesses?”

“Enough, Obi-Wan.” Jango’s voice cut firm.

“You’re not in control here,” Obi-Wan echoed back, satisfaction glinting when Jango’s expression darkened. “There he is. The ruthless bounty hunter we all know how to hate.”

Jango's jaw flexed. He pressed the vibrobrace control. "Your actions have consequences. Your words have consequences. You're trying to drag me into something I'll regret." He leaned forward, teeth bared in a smile. "So—sit and speak like an adult, or be restrained. Which do you choose?" The sarcasm in his tone was impossible to miss.

And damn him, he realized a beat later, he'd let Obi-Wan win. Let himself rise to the bait. But kriff, he wanted to... Obi-Wan's tunic was ruffled, hair sticking in wild angles, face flushed with sweat. Jango's body ached with the thought of slamming him into the couch for an entirely different kind of fight.

But reality hit softly. Obi-Wan tossing the pillow at his head was rash, harmless; Jango caught it easily, but it was an answer.

Jango's jaw flexed. He pressed the vibrobrace control. "Enough."

The door opened at once. Two guards entered, crisp and silent. Jango didn't look away from Obi-Wan as he gave the order. "Harness."

One of the men stepped forward carrying the device. Soft webbing, polished buckles, steel-core straps. Built to look almost gentle. Jango took it from him and held it up, letting Obi-Wan see it for what it was.

"These aren't made to hurt you," Jango said evenly. "They're made to keep you from hurting yourself, or anyone else. You've already proven the risk." His gaze lingered, deliberate. "So we use what's necessary."

Obi-Wan's face was carved into calm, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of unease. He schooled it down, the tightening of his jaw his only admission. He would not give Jango more than that. The guards fastened the harness into place, straps clicking into the couch, because of course the couch doubled as restraint. When they left, the room seemed quieter, heavier.

Jango drew a steady breath, switched on the firepit, giving himself time. He watched it come to life, the flames a good distraction. He unlocked a cabinet, retrieved a decanter and two glasses, set them on the side table by the firepit, and poured. The amber liquid caught the firelight. "Would you like a drink?"

Obi-Wan blinked, suspicious.

"You may choose," Jango clarified, his tone deliberate. "Water or tihaar. Choose carefully, even in small things. Even in your choices, your obedience matters."

Obi-Wan's lips curved, dry and cutting. "Whichever burns more on the way down."

Jango handed him the glass. "Tihaar, then. It matches your temper."

Obi-Wan accepted it but didn't drink. Instead, he turned the glass slowly in his hands, watching the firelight shiver through the liquid. The defiance was quiet, deliberate.

Jango noted it, lips twitching faintly. A small rebellion, tolerated… for now.

Jango considered Obi-Wan, there would be a conversation. There would be dinner. Obi-Wan would be confined to his rooms. And Jango would return to his wing, to debrief with Myles —and bleed off this tension in safer ways.

Because kriff, Obi-Wan was exhausting.

Obi-Wan, his eyes stayed fixed on Jango, bright with defiance. “Strange hospitality, Mand’alor. To bind a guest and then offer a toast.”

Jango leaned back, unhurried. “Stranger still that you mistake yourself for a guest.”

“I was informed that was what I was, by your head of security no less.”

Jango snorted. “At the time, he was not permitted to tell you the truth.”

Obi-Wan leaned back, tugging lightly at the harness, then patted the empty cushion beside him. “Come, sit next to me.”

Jango bit out a laugh. “I’m not as stupid as you think I am.”

Obi-Wan’s mouth tilted. “Interesting. The restraints. The firepit. The drinks. Very charming.” His gaze sharpened. “It reminds me of my time in slavery.”

Jango stilled. His face shuttered, hard, and the silence that followed was heavier than any threat. Already restrained, Obi-Wan could feel the weight of it pressing him further down.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan pressed, voice low. “You’d have some empathy with that situation, wouldn’t you? Considering your own experience. Or is that a wound you don’t let yourself touch?”

The quiet stretched until it became a blade in itself. Then Jango leaned forward, voice flat as cold steel, as though grinding the nerve Obi-Wan had touched back under armor. “This is not a game you want to be playing, Kenobi. You won’t survive it.”

“Tut tut, Fett. Empty threats. You’ve sacrificed too much to kill me now, and we both know it.” Obi-Wan had the gall to look amused. A small teasing smile on his lips.

Jango’s smiled sharply “Death is easy, Kenobi. There are fates far worse.”

“Fates you obviously think I know nothing about?”

Jango hummed “Fates that will be unavoidable if you keep fighting me.”

Obi-Wan tugged again on the harness, Jango smiled “I know you find it hard when you’re not in control. Your words are sharp, to hide your fear.”

“Not of you, I assure you.”

“I wasn’t talking about me.” Jango’s voice dropped into command cadence. “I was referring to this conversation. The one you’ve been avoiding. But we’re having it now… even if we sit here until dawn.”

His tone was clipped, steady, unyielding. “You speak. I listen. I speak. You listen. If you refuse, the harness holds you until you remember how to converse.”

Obi-Wan gave a breathless laugh, sharp as a cut. “If I’m to be a slave to your voice, then let’s get it over with. I’m tired.”

Jango settled back, light catching hard on his cheekbones. His voice had shifted again; calm, deliberate, the cadence of law.

“Listen carefully, Kenobi. *Hold* is a tool, not a weapon. Not a shield you swing at whim. It buys you a breath, nothing more. You may use it to steady yourself before you eat, before you walk, before you train. Vexa and her staff will honor it, because I ordered them to. But it is not indefinite. It is not escape. It is only pause.”

Obi-Wan’s lip curled, but Jango pressed on, flat and certain.

“You will not use it to avoid meals. You will not use it to break schedule. You will not use it to refuse Vexa’s direction. Twist it, and it will be revoked.”

He leaned forward, gaze sharp. “Understand this: the staff are bound by my rules. I am not staff. With me, *Hold* works if I allow it. Because I am not your warden.” His voice dipped, quiet and cutting. “I am your soulbound.”

Obi-Wan’s shoulders sagged, breath uneven. “You think this is sustainable?” His voice cracked, then softened. “I can’t… not like this. Not every day.”

He swallowed, searching Jango’s face for leverage. “Let me offer you something. A bargain.”

Jango arched a brow. “What could you possibly offer me?”

“My compliance,” Obi-Wan said, bitter. “My… cooperation. Not this.” He tugged the harness sharply. “Not screaming, not fighting you at every turn. You want obedience? Then give me terms I can live with. Something more than rules meant to break me.”

Jango studied him, silent. Obi-Wan pressed on, desperation leaking through his restraint. “I could help you. Your Mandalorians don’t know the Jedi way, not like I do. You want to train your foundlings, your sensitives? Then use me.” His throat tightened. “Not as a prisoner you grind down, but as—” he bit the word, loathing it—“a resource.”

For a beat, silence. Then Jango chuckled; soft, amused, cruel.

“Oh, Kenobi,” he drawled. “You think you’re unique? That I haven’t already got Jedi who came to me willingly? Some begged for the privilege. Others saw which way the tide was turning and chose to kneel rather than rot.”

Obi-Wan’s breath caught. His stomach went cold. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Jango leaned back, comfortable now, studying him like a puzzle that had just solved itself. “Tell me then; how is your offer any different?”

Obi-Wan's face went pale, the words he'd just spoken burning in his own ears. He'd offered cooperation. He'd done exactly what he swore he never would.

Jango smiled, sharp and satisfied. "You see it, don't you? You've joined the volunteers. And you did it all on your own."

Obi-Wan went silent, staring into the fire, jaw tight. His silence cut deeper than any snarl.

Jango saw the opening and pressed, his tone shifting suddenly, almost gentle. "Do you remember our first kiss?"

Obi-Wan's head jerked up, eyes flashing. "We've never—"
"You'll lie even to yourself?" Jango cut in smoothly. "We were both Dooku's prisoners. Same cell, Boba crying down the hall. You and I worked together to escape and save him. I'll give you that, you saved his life when the pirates attacked. You nearly died doing it."

Obi-Wan's throat worked, but no words came.

Jango's voice softened, almost fond. "When you carried him to safety, when I thought for a heartbeat you'd given your life for my son, I kissed you. And you kissed me back."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, shook his head once, hard. "No."

"You did." Jango's tone was calm, steady, merciless. "And you've been trying to erase it ever since. But I remember every detail. The taste of ash and burnt chemicals, the heat of your hand still shaking from the fight, Boba gasping in the corner while you let me kiss you. While you kissed me back."

Obi-Wan's lips parted like he might answer, but nothing came. His silence was answer enough.

Jango leaned closer, smiling faintly. "You've always known there was more between us. You've felt the bond, even if you lie about it."

Obi-Wan's voice sharpened, brittle. "It doesn't count. That kiss. None of it. Did you think I wouldn't realize? You and Dooku were working together, the whole thing was staged. A game. Was Boba even in danger?" His eyes burned with anger he hoped would drown the tremor beneath. "Or was that just another piece of bait to lure me in?"

For once, Jango didn't smile. His face hardened. "You think I'd gamble my son's life?" His tone cut like steel. "No. That wasn't the plan. The pirates were unexpected, they arrived for the separatist weapons cache, everything went to hell. Boba was dying, Kenobi. You were too, taking that blast like you did. And I was fighting like a madman to keep you both alive."

Obi-Wan stilled.

Jango's gaze pinned him, sharp and unflinching. "You were stunning that day. Hurling yourself into danger to shield a child who wasn't even yours. That's what made me kiss you. That's why you kissed me back. For one moment you weren't Jedi or enemy. You were Mando. And you were mine."

Obi-Wan's composure cracked, heat rushing into his voice. "You expect me to change my perspective because of that? You kissed me when I was bleeding, half-dead, delirious with pain. You think that makes it real? You think taking advantage of a man at his weakest gives you a claim?"

Obi-Wan's breath came sharp, ragged. "A single lapse doesn't change who I am; or what you are. That kiss meant nothing then, and it means less than nothing now."

Jango didn't rise to Obi-Wan's anger. He only studied him, gaze steady, almost indulgent. "You can call it a mistake," he said quietly, "but we both know better. The moment I kissed you, a part of you knew. You were mine. You surrendered to me, Kenobi; not in defeat, but in truth."

Obi-Wan's hands clenched against the harness, knuckles pale.

Jango leaned in, his voice low and sure. "You let yourself be vulnerable to me. You allowed it. For a heartbeat, you accepted your place in the galaxy; beside me. With me. Before you rebuilt your walls again."

A thin smile crossed his face. "And I'll dismantle those walls as many times as it takes. For one moment with that version of you. The one who kissed me back. And you will kiss me again. You'll call it weakness. I'll call it the truth of the Manda. And we'll repeat it, until even you can't tell the difference."

Obi-Wan only shook his head. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet.
"Is there anything else you wanted to talk about today?"

Jango's expression barely shifted. "Plenty. You and I will be speaking often. You should prepare yourself for that." His voice was calm as steel, steady and unyielding.

"First, understand this: any disruption has consequences. Not just for you."

Obi-Wan's head jerked up, eyes narrowing.

"You're not the only one under this roof," Jango continued. "There are staff. Guards. Other prisoners. Every outburst you indulge, every attempt to claw against the schedule, I decide who pays the cost. Maybe it's you. Maybe it isn't."

The words pressed into the air like cold weight.

"You have no free hours, Kenobi. You have the time I give you, and nothing else. Spend it wisely. When you comply, I reward it. When you fight, you pay for it. No violence outside sparring. No refusal of meals. No damaging property or books." His gaze sharpened. "I'll allow your words—sharp as you like—but that's where your rebellion ends. Words don't break guards, and they don't shatter schedules."

He let the silence settle before shifting tone, lower but just as firm.
"I'm also considering medication. Something to ease your agitation during transition.

Whether you take it willingly or not, the choice is mine. But I'll take your view into account."

Obi-Wan's jaw clenched. "Then take this into account: I don't want it."

Jango didn't blink. "Noted."

He rose, authority sliding back into his posture like armor. "Dinner will be postponed two or three hours. Vexa will frame it as routine. Appearances matter."

He adjusted a vambrace, casual as if the conversation had already ended. "Mij will see you for a health review. His report comes directly to me, including medication recommendations. And tomorrow, you rise on schedule."

Jango's gaze lingered, cool and certain.
"These conversations will continue. Until you accept what you already know."

He turned on his heel. The guards reentered at once.
"Return him to his quarters," Jango ordered. "Mij will examine his injuries tonight."

The straps were unlatched, only to be refastened for escort. Obi-Wan's jaw tightened, but he didn't fight them. His hand still throbbed from where he'd struck beskar, the swelling hot and sharp beneath the skin. A foolish blow, and now even his own body was another line in Jango's ledger.

At the threshold, Jango paused, voice clipped, deliberate.
"Remember what I told you, Kenobi. Every disruption has consequences. For you… or for others. Even when you break yourself, you're not the only one who pays the cost."

Then he was gone, leaving the guards to march Obi-Wan out, the fire burning low behind him.

Obi-Wan didn't look back. He couldn't. The certainty pressed in heavy and suffocating: even his pain wasn't his own anymore.
He said nothing, because silence was all he had left, and sometimes survival was measured in what you refused to give away.

Chapter 17: Assault with Literature

Boba crouched in the maintenance alcove off the east hall, a stolen datapad balanced on his knee. Corridor cams tiled the screen in grainy squares: guards at posts, doors that only opened for the right wrist, Vexa doing her nightly loop with a cup of stimcaf like clockwork.

Third bell in six minutes.
He thumbed the edge of a training vibroknife, no live charge, just a still-deadly point, and slid it back into his boot. The vent grille above his head had four screws; two were already loose. A hex key from the cadet workshop fit fine. He'd timed the air-cycle, too: eight-count on, four off. A kid could hold his breath longer than that.

He wasn't a kid anymore.

Boba had once had the perfect life. His father valued three things: credits, vengeance, and Boba. It was the two of them against the galaxy. He'd been surrounded by endless copies of himself, but his dad always made him feel like one of a kind.

He learned the fun things; plotting a jump by eye, stripping a blaster in the dark, reading fear on a mark's face. There were boring stretches too; hours of maintenance and waiting, but he'd trade this polished, scheduled life for those boring parts in a heartbeat. Soaring through the black. Eating, sleeping, living side by side. His dad had been his life.

That life was gone.

Because of a single Jedi.

His dad had always said they'd destroy the Jedi. He'd teach Boba how; wizard plan, back then. But the first time Boba laid eyes on Obi-Wan, he knew something was wrong. The man glowed. Not light… something else. His dad acted normal until the glowy Jedi left. Then everything changed. Their lives tilted into a new orbit… around the karking glowy-one.

It wasn't just jealousy (though it was that too). There'd been that op where Boba had to fake a capture by General Grievous; and the mantis freak committed to the bit. Too committed. For a minute Boba thought his dad would let Grievous really hurt him after he seared Boba's forearm with a lightsaber. Obi-Wan swooped in and "rescued" him, like he was so karking clever. Then went out of his way to track down Jango and return him. Jango insisted on buying the Jedi dinner, and glowy-one accepted with that stupid little smile. Jango barely

checked Boba's arm. Sure, the Jedi had already slathered bacta on it; didn't matter. Boba got sent to bed early while his dad "thanked" the Jedi with intel.

From that moment on Kamino on, spending time with glowy-one was the focus. Not credits. Not Boba.

Then, on top of everything else, Boba found out he really was *just another clone*. Another number on a list of millions. He hadn't told Jango he'd found out, because what good would it do? It wouldn't change how replaceable he was. How betrayed he felt. Unmoored on Kamino's endless seas.

The only ember Jango kept from the old life was vengeance; against the Republic, the Jedi, anyone who'd caged them. Even glowy-one. His dad's soulbearer. Jango ranted that Obi-Wan should've felt it from the start. He shouldn't have been a Jedi… a dog of the Republic and all that rot.

So, Jango would love his Jedi one day, and rage that his soulbearer was a Jedi the next. Rage that Obi-Wan was his enemy. Had destroyed everything he loved. Had enslaved him.

Jango was convinced he would have both his vengeance *and* Obi-Wan. He could have both. Make Obi-Wan stay; Make him love him; Make him pay.

Boba didn't see the point. He'd make glowy-one pay. One objective was cleaner than three.

He flicked to a different feed. Classroom corridor empty. Observation room lights low behind mirrored glass. Two instructors logged on the door slate for morning rotation. The inner ring around the "guest suites"—fortress was the honest word—ran on a braided permissions tree: Jango. Vexa. Two chiefs. Myles. Everyone else pinged a denial. Unless you went through the guts.

Myles's code rolled at third bell every night, like it had somewhere else to be. Boba hadn't stolen it—yet. But he'd learned its habit by shadowing Myles for a week, counting footfalls, listening for that lazy tap he did on the panel when he thought no one was watching.

He didn't need the code to start. He needed timing.
Third bell in three minutes.
Vexa's route: east hall to the lounge, lounge to supply, supply back to ops. Always with a single guard, never two. Her other hand always on a datapad, replying to five people at once. She never looked up at the ceiling. If he got caught, Vexa would chain him to a desk for a

month, Myles would yank his field access, and Jango wouldn't even yell; he'd just add locks Boba hadn't thought of.

The vent in the east hall dumped into a service crawl that ran behind the observation room and over the classroom anteroom. Jango's precious soulbearer wasn't kept there at night; Boba had checked door logs and meal carts—but class brought the Jedi into the ring where a smart kid could make something happen. Not kill. Not yet. Proximity. Proof of concept. Step one.

He adjusted the clone-issue badge on his belt—cadet access still opened half the service doors if you knew which ones hadn't been rekeyed since the expansion. The clones on night rotation still nodded to him out of habit. "Sir," sometimes. Like they could feel he wasn't like them somehow… even though he was.

Third bell chimed, soft through the vents.
Vexa appeared on the far cam: stimcaf, single guard, eyes on her slate. Right on time. The posted guard in the east hall stepped out to greet her, leaving the sightline on the grille clear for four full seconds—Boba had replayed it a dozen times.
He stood, pocketed the datapad, and loosened the last screw. The grille tilted into his hand without a sound. Air hissed, cycled, paused. He swung up, slid in on the off-beat, and pulled the grille back into place from the inside. The knife in his boot was weight and promise.

He didn't need his dad's time.
He needed access.
He inched forward on elbows, counting crossbeams, lips moving without sound. Two to the branch. Three to the drop. The back of the mirrored glass loomed now, the seam of the observation room door, the faint flicker of a standby light.
Step one wasn't killing the glowy-one.
Step one was getting in.
Somewhere below, a hinge whispered, and footsteps changed their rhythm.

Obi-Wan sat on the edge of the bed and did not move. Vexa stood three paces off with two guards bracketing the door, hands loose at their belts. There was nothing to be gained by speaking, and so he didn't.

Mij arrived with two assistants and a collapsible case that unfolded like a field altar. He looked windblown and unimpressed. Vexa handed him her datapad to look out; no doubt making sure Mij knew Obi-Wan had barely touched his dinner.

“Let’s get this done,” he said, already snapping orders. A scanner warmed in his palm with a soft hum; one assistant laid out gel packs and wraps, the other queued a portable display.

“Obi-Wan, your hand,” Mij said.

Obi-Wan stared at the floorboards.

“Your hand, please,” Mij repeated, tone unchanged.

Obi-Wan looked up, faintly frowning, and offered his right. Mij turned it over, then took the left as well, rolling knuckles beneath his thumb, testing the glide of tendons. The scanner passed in slow arcs. Numbers populated the display.

“Contusion,” Mij said at last. “No fracture. Soft-tissue edema, minor. You cannot use the training room for the next seventy-two hours.”

A flicker—anger or loss—crossed Obi-Wan’s face and was gone.

Mij was already working. “Topical analgesic,” he told an assistant, who passed him a small amp. Mij smoothed the cool gel over abraded skin with professional care, then wrapped the hand in a breathable mesh that cinched itself snug. Obi-Wan didn’t flinch. The pulse oximeter did. “Gentle range of motion only. If it throbs, elevate. If it burns, page me.”

He glanced up. “Any dizziness. Nausea. Blurred vision.”

“No,” Obi-Wan said, voice rough from disuse.

“Scale of one to ten,” Mij asked, “your pain right now?”

“Manageable.”

Mij nodded once, noncommittal. He clipped a sensor to Obi-Wan’s finger, took pulse and oxygen, then checked pupils with a penlight. “Tachycardic but within stress parameters. Mild dehydration.” He flicked his eyes toward Vexa. “Water within arm’s reach. Protein in the next hour.”

“Logged,” Vexa said. Her voice was even, efficient. “Schedule amended to reflect ‘routine evaluation.’ Night staff will be told to expect wakefulness.”

Mij set a sealed bottle and a protein square on the nightstand himself, as if daring Obi-Wan to ignore them. “There are medication options to reduce agitation,” he said, still not looking away. “Non-sedating or otherwise.”

“I don’t want anything,” Obi-Wan said.

“Noted,” Mij replied, and the word sounded like a diagnostic code. He turned to Vexa. “I’ll file two reports—protocol with medication and without. Mand’alor can decide.”

“He will,” Vexa said. To the guards: “Observation, external. No restraints unless staff deem it necessary for safety.”

Mij finished the wrap with a last precise tug, then tested two fingers' worth of wiggle room and stepped back. "I'll review you again in the morning. If the swelling climbs, page me immediately."

He clicked the scanner off. The assistants collapsed the case, gear vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

At the door, Vexa paused. "You will sleep," she said, not unkindly. "If staff need to enter, 'Hold' will be honored. Use it to give yourself a moment to calm, not escape."

The room dimmed on her gesture. The guards took their posts outside; the lock engaged with a soft, final sound.

Obi-Wan looked down at the mesh on his hand, flexed once, felt the ache announce itself, contained. He lifted the water, tasted metal and chlorine, and drank anyway. The night pressed in: quiet, orderly, inescapable. He lay back and stared at the ceiling until even the pattern of its seams began to feel like a cage.

The ops conference room hummed with low light and the quiet thrum of the fortress generators. Vexa took the head of the table and set her datapad down in the exact center.

"On record," she said. "Scope: incident review, medical, schedule, security posture, comms. Keep it crisp."

Cody sat on her right in matte armor, bucket on the table beside his elbow. Mij slid into a chair with two lines of fatigue stamped between his brows. Myles—Jango's shadow and intelligence lead—took the far seat, all clean edges and unreadable calm. Quartermaster Rett Varad and House Steward Taia rounded out the group; both had tablets already open.

"Medical first," Vexa said.

Mij flicked a scan to the room display: three tidy graphs, no drama. "Contusion to the hand, no fracture. Soft-tissue swelling only. Mild dehydration. Elevated heart rate consistent with stress. I've wrapped the hand; analgesic applied. He is barred from the training room for seventy-two hours, light range of motion only. Night staff should expect wakefulness. Water and protein within reach." He didn't bother to sigh. "Two protocol drafts will be on your desks before midnight: with medication, without. Mand'alor will decide."

"Good," Vexa said. "Security."

Cody didn't look at his notes. "Two-guard rotation outside his door until first meal. No single staff entry. Soft harness staged in the suite and in the corridor lockbox. If he calls 'Hold,' staff honor it for a short pause—fifteen to thirty seconds—then proceed. If he escalates, we escalate: verbal reminder, harness, physician. No one improvises."

“Add a sweep of the sitting room before breakfast,” Myles said mildly. “He grabbed a book tonight. I prefer not to see ‘assault with literature’ in tomorrow’s log.”

Taia’s mouth twitched; she buried it. Vexa didn’t bother. “Logged. House.”

“Dinner pushed two hours and delivered as ‘routine schedule recalibration,’” Taia said, already sending drafts. “Kitchen will portion for stress tolerance. No red stim leaves, low acid. I’ll brief service that Mand’alor requested privacy and extended evaluation. That will tamp gossip.”

Rett Varad tapped a finger against his tablet. “Logistics will flag the change across the calendar and ripple staff rotations by fifteen minutes so it reads as planned. I’ll also rotate two non-gossipers onto that corridor.” A beat. “Yes, I still have a list.”

“Of course you do,” Myles murmured.

Vexa turned to him. “Comms?”

“Internal channels get a one-liner from Ops,” Myles said. “‘Routine adjustment to evaluation block. No impact to training cadence.’ Nothing else. I’ll scrub the chatter and sit on anything that smells like mythmaking. If anyone asks why he’s in a hand wrap, they’ll be told he overtrained. Clean and boring.” He paused, then added, “And I’ll schedule a vent-route audit for the morning. After class.”

“Training,” Vexa said. “Instructor cadence?”

“Ventress gets a private brief; restriction on the hand, honor ‘Hold,’ no engagement with the word games,” Cody said. “Ahsoka’s the same; she can carry it to the rest of the instructor pool. We keep their focus on curriculum, not containment.”

Mij lifted a finger. “If he spikes agitation during a lesson, the instructor steps out and pages Medical or Security. No coaxing. No bargaining.”

“Noted,” Vexa said. She looked around the table. “Reminders: No physical force outside sanctioned sparring. No skipped meals. No damage to property.” She let that hang. “If he uses his words, let him. Words don’t break guards.”

Rett cleared his throat. “Morale note: postponements always breed speculation. I’ll seed two routine maintenance tickets in the east wing. Give the staff another story to tell that isn’t Kenobi.”

“Smart,” Myles said. “I’ll encourage that rumor to grow legs.”

Vexa closed her pad. “Decisions: We hold schedule at standard wake. Night posture as Cody outlined. Two med protocols to Mand’alor. House pushes the ‘routine’ message within the hour. Ventress and Ahsoka briefed before lights-out. Any objections?”

Silence. Professional and complete.

“Good. One more item.” Vexa’s voice stayed even. “Mand’alor reiterated: any disruption carries consequences, not solely for Kenobi. That does not grant license for staff to freelance. You follow protocol. Consequences are Mand’alor’s to assign.”

Cody’s chin dipped. “Copy.”

Mij stood, already packing his case. “I’ll check the hand at oh-seven-hundred. If the swelling climbs, we move to ice and stricter restriction.”

“Meeting adjourned,” Vexa said. “K’uur with the gossip. Do your jobs.”

Chairs slid back. Tablets clicked shut. The room emptied in efficient lines, the fortress humming on as if none of it could ever be otherwise.

Chapter 18: Finding Anakin

Rook keyed the doors. “Commander Rex, as requested.”

Rex stepped in, bucket tucked under his arm. Full beskar armour, Jango’s clan sigil stark on the pauldron. He stopped at the edge of the circle; Jango at the head, Silas to his right, Myles from Intelligence ghosting a dim holomap of Alderaan’s orbital lanes. Cody stood behind Myles, hands visible, helmet on; furniture until called upon.

Jango didn’t sit. “Report.”

Rex set his helmet on the table with a soft clunk. “Primary objective remained ‘alive.’ We held the ring with three interdictors and a customs cordon per ROE Blackleaf.” He nodded to Myles; the holomap brightened. “Skywalker used the relief corridor we left for medevac - timed the shield cycle between the second and third hulls, tucked into a civilian waste scow, and rode its thermal bloom out of the net. Micro-jumped to Alderaan’s shadow, then disappeared into atmosphere traffic. We reacquired him at ground level once; lost him in the refugee flows.”

“Casualties?” Silas asked.

“Minimal. Our side: two concussions, one broken wrist. Skywalker: minimal; confirm on acquisition.”

“Alive is not a suggestion,” Jango said, cold.

Rex bowed his head. “Yes, Mand’alor. Which is why I’m requesting a resource not on my current slate.”

“Name it.”

“Ahsoka Tano.”

The room didn’t shift, but attention did.

“She stands the best chance of getting him to come in under his own steam,” Rex said. “Sir - he’ll run from me. He won’t run from her.”

Myles flicked two sectors on the map. “We still have an open tasking to locate Senator Amidala. She and Skywalker separated during the ground push. Alderaan leadership is cooperating publicly; privately, the Organa network is… practised at misplacing people.”

Silas snorted. “‘Practised,’” he echoed, dry.

“Risk,” Myles went on. “Tano defects with target.”

“Assessment?” Jango asked.

“She won’t,” Rex answered before anyone else could. “If she wanted to burn us, she could’ve done it ten times over from inside the ba’jur’yaim. She believes in the young. She won’t risk them; surely she’s proven that.”

Cody spoke for the first time. “She knows his cadence.”

Myles nodded, thinking. “Constraints if approved: visible lethality stays holstered, no nets in visual range, no hard contact inside the approach radius. Ghost tail only. If she signals ‘Hold,’ everyone freezes unless red-zone.”

“Dignity remains a constraint,” Jango said. Then, to Rex: “You’ll ride her wing. She commands the approach. You hold the perimeter. If she fails…”

“Then we do what we have to,” Rex said. “Once he’s in our sights, we won’t let him go.” He looked across at Cody. “We secure him with force, with minimal injury—if it can be helped.”

Jango’s gaze settled on him like a weight. “He was your General.”

“Yes, Mand’alor.”

“Can you do this?”

“I can,” Rex said.

Jango tipped his chin to Rook. “Bring Tano.”

Ahsoka entered in a plain slate tunic, lekku wrapped back, saber at her hip. She didn’t bow. She inclined her head to Jango. “Mand’alor, you asked for me.” She clocked Rex and couldn’t disguise the smile.

Rex didn’t hide the relief in his shoulders. “I did.”

Jango gestured to the table. “Anakin Skywalker. Alive. You lead the contact.”

Ahsoka’s eyes flicked to the map, then back to Jango. “Terms.”

“Name them.”

“No surround visible within one kilometre of the meet,” she said. “If he sees a cage, he’s gone. No suppressor on initial contact. You can’t tear out his balance and expect him to listen.” Her gaze shifted to Rex. “Rex walks in unarmed.”

Rex gave a fractional nod. “Logged.”

“You will be tracked,” Myles said, neutral. “Ghost tail only. You break perimeter, we tighten it. You call ‘Hold,’ we freeze.”

“Accepted,” Ahsoka said. “Also: if Padmé is located, she is treated as a non-combatant. No cuffs unless she raises a weapon. Medical on standby. She is not bait.”

Silence. Silas’s stylus hovered, then resumed. Myles didn’t look up.

Jango’s mouth flattened. “We are already looking for Senator Amidala. She is to be brought in alive. She will not be harmed.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Ahsoka said.

Jango’s eyes hardened. Then he nodded once. “Logged as directive: non-combatant handling. Not bait.”

“Additionally,” Ahsoka said, “I choose the meet site. Somewhere he remembers as safe. You can seed your people beyond the horizon.”

“Location?” Silas asked.

“I’ll tell Rex once I’ve scouted.” Her tone didn’t shift. “You try to outguess me, he’ll smell it.”

“Communication protocol?” Myles asked.

“Open channel to me only,” Ahsoka said. “If he hears other voices, he’s gone.”

Jango considered her for a long beat, weighing risk like metal in his hand. “Approved. Constraints stand. You bring him to Sundari alive, or you hold him in a place of our choosing until we can move in on him. If he draws on civilians, perimeter shifts from ghost to hard.”

“He won’t,” she said.

“If he does,” Jango said, voice cool, “you will choose Mandalore.”

Ahsoka didn’t flinch. “I already did.”

Rex let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Equipment,” Silas said, moving to logistics before the room could warm. “You’ll take a civilian shuttle with clean plates, two plain-clothes medics staged out of sight, one unmarked gunship at ten klicks to serve as eyes only. Your tail will ride high atmosphere. No interdictors unless you call them.”

“Good,” Ahsoka said. “I’ll need a teacher’s kit: bandages, sedatives, ration packs, a heat blanket. He won’t have slept.”

Rex added quietly, “He’ll be looking for Padmé.”

Ahsoka nodded once. “So will I.”

Jango looked from one to the other. “Word of caution,” he said. “He is not stupid. He will try to turn your care into leash. Do not hand him the leash.”

Ahsoka’s mouth tilted, not quite a smile. “You’re not the first man to warn me about Anakin Skywalker.”

“Depart in one hour,” Silas said. “Your brief will be on the slate in the hangar. Codeword remains ‘Hold.’ If you need a second voice, use ‘Home.’ That will lock Rex’s men out of your ear unless you lift it.”

Rex met her eyes. “I’ll be where you tell me to be,” he said. “And I won’t move unless you say.”

“Good,” Ahsoka said. “Because if you move before I say, he’ll run—and we’ll be back here with smaller chances.”

“Go,” Jango said. “Bring him in.”

Ahsoka tipped her head again—acknowledgement, not deference—and turned on her heel. Rex fell in beside her without needing to be told.

At the door, she paused and glanced back. “One more thing.”

Jango waited.

“When he asks about Obi-Wan,” she said, “what do you want me to say?”

“Tell him what you need to in order to get him to come in. Once he’s secured, tell him the truth.”

Ahsoka’s eyes flickered; some small relief, or approval. “Logged.”

The doors whispered shut behind her.

Corridor — En Route to the Hangar

Rex matched her stride. “You already have a spot.”

“I have three,” she said. “He’ll choose one by how he breathes when I name them.” She glanced sideways. “You bring him home, Rex. Not a prisoner. Not a trophy. A person.”

Rex’s mouth worked once. “Copy.”

“Good,” she said. “Because he’ll be listening for that in your voice before he listens to me.”

They turned into the light of the hangar—civilian shuttle prepped, slate waiting on the ramp, a crate marked with a red cross that meant more than medicine.

Above them, high and invisible, a ghost tail spun up its engines and waited for the word that would keep its hands off.

“Let’s go,” Ahsoka said.

Rex sealed his helmet and fell into step, the metronome inside him set to a cadence he hoped would still mean home.

Old Service Bridge, Aldera Industrial — Dusk

Ahsoka chose the spot because it used to be nothing: a maintenance span tucked beneath a tram line, wind carving a low whistle through the railings. No nets. No hard perimeter in sight. High above, the ghost tail circled out of range.

“Hold,” she said on the open channel, and the whole sky went still in Rex’s ear.

She stood alone, palms visible on the rail.

Anakin stepped out of the shadow like he’d never been gone, cloak frayed, hair wind-tossed, eyes too bright. He didn’t draw. He didn’t smile.

“’Soka,” he said, the old cadence hitching once.

She breathed it in and didn’t take a step. “Hi, Skyguy.”

A beat of wind. The bones of the maglev sighed like a tired bell.

“I’m not here to arrest you,” she said. “I’m here to invite you home.”

His jaw shifted. “Whose.”

“Ours,” Ahsoka said. “Mandalore’s building something. A school. A life. Obi-Wan is there.”

His eyes flicked, fast, hungry. “Alive?”

“Alive,” she said. “Safe.”

“Happy?” It came out like he didn’t believe in the word anymore but wanted to.

She swallowed. “He is.” The lie landed between them like a small, necessary sin.

She didn’t let it linger. “The younglings, too. All of them from the Temple—we got them out. They’re scared, but they’re eating, sleeping, learning. They need teachers who know how to hold a saber and a heart at the same time.” A softer breath. “They need you.”

He looked past her, to where the tram line once ran bright and clean. “I have more than the Order to worry about now.”

“Padmé,” she said, gentle.

He didn’t confirm. He didn’t need to.

“I’m glad you and Obi-Wan are… okay,” he added, and his mouth tipped, almost a smile, almost a wince. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

She took that and didn’t break on it. “Come see,” she said. “Let me show you what we’re building. See the kids with your own eyes. If you hate it, you can leave.”

He shook his head. “If I leave, your ghost tail will be on me in moments. I’ll have to fight my way out. If I stay, you’ll try to make me choose. I won’t let you put a leash on me.”

“Then don’t make me,” Ahsoka said. “Walk with me.”

“No.”

Silence stretched. They held it together by habit.

“Meal, then,” she said, lighter, like it was the last ordinary thing left. “No pitch. No leash. Just… food. I brought real bread. We can sit on my ramp like we used to sit on crates.”

Something in his face eased, an old picture pinned to a wall in his mind. “Bread,” he said, like he remembered how to laugh at her priorities and couldn’t quite get there.

“Bread,” she said. “And stew. And a blanket because you never remember the cold until it’s too late.”

He looked at the empty sky, suspicious of its peace. Then he nodded once. “A meal.”

“Logged,” she said, too soft for the mic. Then, louder, to the air: “Home.” The code locked Rex’s men out of her ear; only he would hear her if she opened the channel again.

Civilian Shuttle — Ramp Down

She kept it small. One lantern. Two bowls. A folded blanket. His saber stayed at his hip. Hers slept.

Ahsoka broke bread with her hands and handed him the larger half. He took it like it might disappear.

“You’ll like the armorer,” she said, easy talk to fill the space. “She’s blunt. The younglings think she’s some sort of character from an old legend.”

He huffed. “That sounds safe. Are you sure you’re not getting bored?”

“Safe is better than the alternative,” she said. “I’m tired of war… Safe is good.”

He tore bread, dipped it, ate. She watched his shoulders relax by a degree and did not let herself look at the cup in his hand for more than a second at a time.

“Obi-Wan’s there,” she said, because it still felt like medicine. “He’s… in the work. It helps.”

“Good,” Anakin said. He took another bite, slower now. “Good.”

“All those old Jedi rules you always hated are gone,” she added, a gentle prod. “You can teach your way… you always had a way of making the Force make sense for the little ones.”

He smiled then, real and crooked, and it almost undid her. “I did, didn’t I.”

The smile faded. The tired came in like tide. He rubbed a hand over his jaw and blinked like the lantern had gotten brighter.

“Ahsoka,” he said, confused around the edges. “What did you—”

She shifted closer on the ramp, steady, palms up. “Name,” she said, because she had to stay inside the same rules she had taught. “Place. Direct.”

He blinked slowly. “What?”

“Hurt,” she said; because even now she used her exercise. “Everywhere” she added as she noticed his hand shook as he tried to lift his cup.

She took it gently, set it down. “Direct,” she whispered, and her voice didn’t fail.

He looked at her like a boy at the crèche door. “Don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” she said. “I’m right here.”

He blinked again, heavy now, fighting something he couldn’t see. “’Soka… you didn’t…?”

“I won’t let them hurt you,” she said, and the truth was in it, even if all the truths didn’t fit in one sentence.

His head tilted, lashes lowering. “Padmé,” he murmured.

“We’re looking,” she said. “We’ll find her.”

He nodded like a man stepping off a ledge he had already measured, and his eyes closed.

She caught his shoulder and guided him down to the blanket, hands careful at elbow and neck, every touch announced to no one and everyone. “Touching your arm,” she said. “Lowering you to the deck. I’ve got you.”

He slept, breath steadying into the kind that meant the fight would have to wait until morning.

Ahsoka sat there with him for a count of sixty. Then she opened the line only Rex could hear.

“Perimeter, hold,” she said softly. “Approach ramp. No hard contact.”

Rex’s boots were quiet. He came into view and stopped a metre back, hands open.

“Alive,” he said, more prayer than report.

“Alive,” she answered.

Cody’s shadow stayed at the hatch, silent and large. Myles's voice didn’t come; Ahsoka had locked him out for this part.

“Dignity is a constraint,” Ahsoka said, reminding herself as much as them. “Upper arm, not wrists. Announce. No helmet cams in his face.”

Rex nodded once, then met her eyes. “Band?”

Her stomach tilted. She looked down at Anakin, at the lines in his face that hadn’t been there when she was a child. At the saber at his hip. At her own hands.

“He didn’t choose it,” she said. The words scraped. “So it goes on.”

Rex didn’t move. He waited for her to say it again, so no one could rewrite it later.

“Apply the band,” Ahsoka said. “Announce, ask, act.”

They did it by the book even though he was sleeping.

“Anakin,” Rex said quietly, because names mattered. “Applying a suppressor band to your left wrist. Medical-grade. Temporary until cleared. Touching your forearm now.”

The cuff clicked shut with a sound that had ruined more than one morning lately. Anakin didn’t stir. Ahsoka flinched for him.

“Lightsaber,” Cody said, still not crossing the line. Ahsoka nodded; she took it herself, both hands, and laid it in a padded case like a relic. “Logged,” she said, to bind the moment to procedure, not appetite.

Rex looked back at her. “Transport?”

“Infirmary first,” she said. “Hydration, vitals, observation. No interrogation. I’ll brief Jango.”

Rex hesitated. “You want to be the one to tell him?”

She nodded. The guilt didn’t show; she wouldn’t let it. “Secure him. No shoulder pats. No familiarity.”

They lifted him in a soft harness, bodies close but impersonal, the way you carry a brother through smoke.

At the hatch, Ahsoka keyed a private band. “Rook,” she said. “Tano. Skywalker secured. Alive. No civilian harm. Sedative used. Band applied. We’ll need a quiet room prepped and… send word to Intelligence: accelerate the search for Senator Amidala. Priority non-combatant handling.”

“Logged,” Rook said. “Mand’alor requests a debrief at oh-two.”

“Tell him I’ll be there,” Ahsoka said.

She looked at Anakin again, at the line of the band against his skin. It was a leash. It was also a promise: he would wake. He would breathe. He would live long enough to hate her and then, maybe, forgive her.

Rex paused at the threshold. “You okay, General?” he asked before he remembered.

Ahsoka didn’t correct him. “I will be,” she said. It was not a lie yet, only a future she intended to build.

“And Padmé?” he asked.

“We find her,” Ahsoka said. “We bring her safe. If she’s with him, he’ll stop running. If he stops running, he can start choosing.”

Rex nodded and moved.

Ahsoka stood alone on the ramp for another breath and looked out at the scarred curve of Aldera. The wind lifted and set her lekku humming with the old train’s ghost.

“Dignity is a constraint,” she said again, to the empty air. Then she turned, sealed the hatch, and followed the men carrying the person she loved most that she had just betrayed for the second time in her life—because losing him again was not an option she was willing to write into the plan.

Chapter 19: The Corner Warrior

Vexa was different this morning.
Usually, after waking him, she wouldn't stop, reciting his schedule like he didn't have constant access to it, reminding him of rules, listing "areas for improvement" from the day before. Today she was quiet.

"Are you all right?" he asked at last.

She frowned, almost offended. "Yes, Runi'oyay'dinuir. I am as I should be."

She stayed that way all the way to breakfast. Cody was already there, anchored at the far end of the table. Kira, Ren, and Mij as well. A moment later, Waxer and Boil slipped in.

"A full house," he said to no one in particular.

The doors parted and Jango entered with a Mandalorian in full beskar at his shoulder. Jango took the head of the table. The other posted in the corner and simply stared; T-visor fixed on Obi-Wan, steady as a rifle sight.

"What's all this?" Obi-Wan asked Jango, as nonchalantly as he could manage.

Jango considered him. "I felt like having breakfast with my Runi'oyay'dinuir this morning."

Obi-Wan frowned; Jango had not had breakfast with him since his arrival. "What's the special occasion?"

Jango shrugged. "I don't need a reason to visit you, cyar'ika. I like your company."

"And the warrior? He's new," Obi-Wan said, taking a sip of his favourite tea—perfectly brewed, of course. If nothing else, they could make a decent cup of tea here.

"He's observing you today," Jango said, watching Obi-Wan's throat bob as he swallowed. "I see we got the tea right."

Obi-Wan snorted. "That might be the only thing. Am I to expect his presence"—he tipped his chin toward the visor staring him down—"every day, or is this just a blessing for today?"

Jango smiled. "How long is a piece of string?"

Obi-Wan didn't answer. He knew the riddle—however long needed. Which was to say, Jango admitted the warrior was necessary, for reasons he wasn't sharing.

He pushed the thought aside. Something was clearly in motion; asking would only ratchet his frustration.

Obi-Wan eyed everyone as he ate. Meals were always well prepared and always food he enjoyed… no doubt the product of his men's spying… A thought which still hurt with a dull

ache. He'd been stalked. Hunted. They'd learned everything they could about him and he'd never even noticed.

Nice food was a consolation prize at best. The tea was a prize.

It was a strange performance that was aimed at confusing him. The room was pleasant, the food delicious, the tea exactly to his liking. His clothing was comfortable; the temperature tuned to his comfort. Sometimes he even let himself feel comfortable, in amongst the talking of people who he had once called friend. Waxer, Boil, Cody… But reality always came crashing back to him. Like falling into cold water.

Case in point, the guards stepping forward at Jango's prompting. It was time for class.

Jango, the warrior, and Cody fell in with him, Vexa, and the rostered guards for the walk to the classroom. At the last junction, Jango peeled off with Cody through a side door—an observation room, presumably. As the panel slid, Obi-Wan caught a glimpse of a familiar profile inside and stopped dead.

"Ahsoka?" he breathed.

The door sealed. Vexa's voice cut cleanly through his pulse. "I can see you are distracted. Let's keep moving."

He nodded; then feinted right, slipped past the inner guard, and threw his shoulder into the panel. It bucked halfway open on the safety latch before Vexa snapped, "Red zone!"

Hands closed on him at once—upper arms, not wrists, a clean centre-mass hold. They were firm and careful, per protocol.

He was not.

Obi-Wan braced a boot against the jamb and wrenched the panel another handspan. For an instant he had a clear line into the room: Ahsoka, in a plain slate tunic, bare-wristed. No band. Beside her, eyebrow arched, was Ventress.

The door slammed home on the lock. The grips on his arms tightened.

He stopped struggling; then heard another commotion behind him. Someone else was fighting. He let himself be pulled back. Alarms blared as the rest were re-routed from the opposite corridor; Quinlan Vos had broken free and was barrelling toward them.

The men holding Obi-Wan shifted to meet the new threat. Obi-Wan locked eyes with Vos and nodded. It felt good... how easily they fell into sync, it clicked, the old choreography: elbows, weight, breath. For half a heartbeat it felt like stealing the Force back by muscle memory alone..

He knew there wasn't any point. Vos knew too. That didn't stop them. In a breath they were back-to-back, ready. The guards watched, waiting for a clean chance to end it with minimal injury.

Jango chose that moment to open the door again and come out, fury pared down to function. Ahsoka stood behind him with Ventress.

“Stand. Down.” Jango’s voice didn’t rise; the corridor obeyed anyway. Sirens cut.

“Split the flow,” Vexa snapped, already moving. “Blue team contain front. Gold pivot ninety for Vos. No wrists.” Guards peeled off; two took Obi-Wan at biceps and belt, clean centre-mass hold. Two more braced for Quinlan.

Quinlan didn’t bother pretending innocence. “Heard there was a reunion,” he said, hands already lifting. A guard caught his forearm high, another took his hip, and the forward momentum bled out without anyone hitting the floor.

“Second warning, Vos,” Vexa said, voice like a metronome. “Do not escalate.”

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on Ahsoka. Bare skin at the wrist. No band. He swallowed around the sudden tilt of the world.

“Ahsoka,” he managed, hoarse, “you’re—”

“No debates in the corridor,” Jango cut in, an order. Then, to the room: “Seat them.”

Cody stepped into Obi-Wan’s line of sight, hands open, helmet on, posture steady. He didn’t go for the suppressor. “Obi-Wan, eyes.”

Obi-Wan kept them where they wanted to be—over Cody’s shoulder, on Ahsoka. She didn’t move closer. She didn’t wave. She lifted two fingers at chest height—the smallest acknowledgement—then let her hand fall.

“Observation,” Cody said, even. “You saw Ahsoka. You want to go through that door. Choice: walk with me to class now, or we take a two-minute reset in the quiet alcove and then go in. Which do you choose?”

Obi-Wan breathed once, sharp. “Why is she unbound?”

A beat. Cody didn’t look away. “Question logged. Answer comes after we’re seated.”

“Don’t you—”

“Which do you choose,” Cody repeated, neutral as a checklist, not unkind.

Quinlan huffed a laugh from where Gold team had him pinned politely. “He hates lists,” he offered. “Always has.”

“Vos,” Vexa said without turning. “Seat five. Walk or chair.”

“Walking, alor’ad,” he said, and for once he meant it. The guards released in the same breath they took a half-step back; he fell into place between them with a shrug that looked like compliance.

Jango's gaze never left Obi-Wan. "Runi'oyay'dinuir," he said softly, the honorific a promise and a warning. "You will have your answers. You will also have your class. Decide how you walk there."

It shouldn't have worked. It did. Obi-Wan's jaw set. He stared at Ahsoka one heartbeat longer—she held, steady as a rock in a river—then he let the fight run out of his shoulders.

"Class," he said. "On my feet."

"Logged," Vexa replied. The grip on his arm loosened to a guidance touch at elbow and belt, announced and brief. "Touching your left elbow. Moving."

As they passed the observation door, Ahsoka didn't reach for the panel. She said only, "Name. Place. Direct," under her breath—a mantra for the moments she almost faltered.

"I'm glad your alive," Obi-Wan said, not trusting his voice for more.

Ventress's mouth quirked. "Five minutes to first bell," she said. "Try not to redecorate any more doors."

Inside, the classroom was already resetting from alarm posture—locks blinking green across the dais, seat lights steady. Drallig didn't turn his head; Windu didn't need to. Barriss stared at a point three fingers above her knee and kept breathing. Plo Koon dipped his chin the width of a breath when Obi-Wan crossed the threshold; Eeth Koth's jaw was granite over the tendons.

"Seat four," Vexa said.

Obi-Wan paused with his hip against the chair, looked to Jango—still in the doorway, still watching like a man who counted bullets and breaths the same way.

"Two conditions," Obi-Wan said, low. "You answer me when we're done. And he"—he flicked his chin at the corner Mandalorian—"keeps his visor off my back."

Jango didn't blink. "You'll have a briefing with me and Vexa after this session," he said. "And he stays. He observes; he does not hover."

The corner warrior shifted to the upper rail without argument.

Cody touched the chair's coupler—"Engaging lap restraint"—and the lock closed. The low hum of the local shield raised a hair off Obi-Wan's forearms. It felt like a hand on the back, impersonal and firm.

"Breathe in fours," came from somewhere to his left. Quinlan, not looking at him.

"I never did enjoy hanging out with you," Obi-Wan replied. Quinlan's laugh tasted like a better day; somehow that hurt more.

Vexa moved to the dais. "Roll call," she said, crisp. Names, checks, the small acknowledgements that tell a room how to sit inside its own skin. When she reached

“Kenobi,” he didn’t make her say it twice.

“Present,” he said, a promise to ghosts. I am here. I am still here.

Only then did Jango step back through the observation door. It slid shut with a hush, and Obi-Wan let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

“You weren’t meant to arrive until after they were seated,” Cody seethed.

Ventress shrugged. “You’re annoyed we’re too early.”

“We had the timing set that way for a reason,” Jango said, cold. “We are already dealing with enough without adding this.”

A heavy thud and then another. Boba landed a moment after the grate which had fallen half off the desk and crashed onto the ground to the surprise of Windu who had not expected a child to land a moment later, and swivel.
The alarm flashed red in the glass; Jango’s hand hit the panel; time didn’t change.
The boy dropped. A straight line to Obi-Wan. Surprise hadn’t finished arranging Obi-Wan’s face before Boba’s fingers pulled the knife from his boot with practiced ease.
“Boba—no!” Myles’ voice cracked on the vowel. Scenario Ninety-Three, with a child’s face.
Leather hiss. Metal cleared.
Obi-Wan moved; but the band caught the chair’s coupler; his own restraint stole half a step.
Impact. A wrong, dull sound. Warmth spilled fast. The air turned to iron. “Myles!” Cody barked.

Jango ran for the door; the others pounded after. They rounded the corner into chaos—Myles had Boba wrenched back and in binders, the boy’s hands and tunic smeared with Obi-Wan’s blood.

Vexa was shouting for a kit. She’d cut the restraint and had both palms clamped over Obi-Wan’s abdomen. He was conscious, breath catching, words lost under the noise. Jango dropped to his knees, terror narrowing the world, fury hammered flat into function “with me, cyar’ika,” he said, the endearment falling out with a desperate breath. He would not lose Obi-Wan. He pressed his hand over the wound, hard and sure, freeing Vexa to move to the head.

“Obi-Wan, stay with me,” she said, voice low and exact.

“Eyes here, Obi-Wan. Count with me. One—two—three—four.”
“Qui-Gon?” he whispered, blue-lipped, lost.

Chapter 20: Tea Time

Obi-Wan woke to an all-consuming peace.

He opened his eyes to his old quarters; the ones he'd shared with Qui-Gon. He knew something about it was wrong, but the ease of it let him almost forget.

He drifted into their living room and found Qui-Gon preparing their usual breakfast. It smelled like comfort… like home. Warm light poured through the single window, dust motes hanging in the beam like drifting stars.

Obi-Wan wished he could stay here. Always.

Qui-Gon turned, a small, relaxed smile crinkling his eyes. It had been so long that Obi-Wan wanted to run to him and hug him in sheer relief. He didn't—not yet. He knew Qui-Gon. He held himself back.

"Please sit, Obi-Wan," his Master said—and what a sound that was: familiar, steadying.

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied, moving to the small table, already set.

Once he'd sat, Qui-Gon brought him a bowl of oats dressed with his usual spices and fruit, and Obi-Wan's favourite tea. Qui-Gon always made it perfectly; he'd taught Obi-Wan the ritual as a Padawan; patience learned first through learning to brew the perfect cup.

"Thank you," he murmured, and tucked in as Qui-Gon joined him.

They ate in easy silence for a time, content with warmth, quiet, and each other's company.

When Obi-Wan finished, Qui-Gon set down his spoon. "We have much to discuss, my Padawan."

"Is this a dream?" Obi-Wan asked before he could go on.

Qui-Gon sat back. "Yes… and no."

Obi-Wan laughed; because it was funny in the moment, and because only Qui-Gon would answer a question without answering it. He remembered when that had frustrated him rather than amused.

Qui-Gon smiled, as if reading Obi-Wan's thoughts without effort. "This is a dream, but that is not all it is. I have come to you through the Force."

Obi-Wan frowned and lifted his wrist. It was bare.

"For now, it has been removed," Qui-Gon said. "He will not leave you without it any longer than necessary; it threatens his control."

Obi-Wan's expression darkened. He looked down and away.

"I am sorry, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said softly.

Obi-Wan looked up. "Why? None of this is your doing."

Qui-Gon shook his head. "We all had our parts to play. I fell into the same trap as the rest of the Jedi. I was arrogant. I knew the boy was dangerous, and I didn't care. I thought it was worth the risk; a lesser of two evils, if you wish. A smaller danger set against a greater darkness I could feel hovering just out of sight. I acted in fear."

"But you were wrong, Master. Anakin wasn't dangerous. Without him, the war would have dragged on for Force knows how long."

Qui-Gon looked surprised. "Anakin was—and still is—dangerous. I have seen the truth of it. In every path, Anakin Skywalker is dangerous… But that is a discussion for your next near-death experience. For now, we must focus on what will help you most. I cannot keep you here indefinitely."

Obi-Wan went to argue on instinct; offended on Anakin's behalf—but Qui-Gon lifted a hand.

"I should never have asked you to train him when you were not yet a Knight. I put too much on you, too young. I was obsessed with prophecy and failed to be the Master you needed."

Obi-Wan considered him. "You made no more mistakes than I. But if you feel you need my forgiveness, you have it."

"Thank you," Qui-Gon said, honest and unguarded, and Obi-Wan felt him grow brighter in the Force.

They fell into a quiet moment, resting in each other's presence.

"You keep reaching for the Force when you know you cannot touch it," Qui-Gon said softly. "Why?"

"I don't mean to. I know it isn't there. But I'm so used to it—it's like catching something thrown at you; your body moves before your mind."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Does it cause you pain?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's jarring... and yes, painful."

"Hmm… And now?"

"I'm whole again. But knowing it's going to be taken from me again… I don't know if I can bear it."

"Do you know what the suppressor does?" Qui-Gon asked, studying Obi-Wan's face.

Obi-Wan nodded. "It prevents me from reaching out in the Force."

“And?”

“Without my ability to reach out to the Force, it cannot reach back. There is a wall between me and my ability to wield it.”

“Partially right.”

Obi-Wan frowned, trying to understand. “I don’t see what you’re getting at, Master.”

“The Force is within all living things,” Qui-Gon said.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied, a touch of irritation slipping through. “You’ve told me that at least a thousand times, Master.” Embarrassment flushed his cheeks—he sounded like Anakin. He drew a breath. “How does that help me?”

“The Force is in your very cells,” Qui-Gon said. “And you are Stewjonian.” He glanced aside, as if listening. “We don’t have much time. He’s about to put it back on.”

The calm left Obi-Wan in a rush. He stood. “No—”

He reached for Qui-Gon, and in the next moment he was in his Master’s arms, clinging tighter than he’d ever held anyone.

Qui-Gon’s beard tickled his ear as he murmured, “Don’t reach out for the Force… reach within. That cannot be—”

The Temple was gone.

So was Qui-Gon.

Cold swallowed the light. Obi-Wan lurched for the warmth of home and found only dark. He broke; and wept.

Cold beskar kissed his wrist. The world thinned to a ring of metal and the taste of tea he would never finish.

Myles stepped into Jango’s path while the med team worked on Obi-Wan. He watched him pace for a long minute before speaking. “I’ve got my best on interrogation,” he said at last. “We’ll find out if anyone put him up to this.”

Jango waved him off. Boba could wait.

“You could do more in interrogation, be there for Boba, better than pacing here,” Myles pressed.

“Go away, Myles,” Jango snapped.

“He’s hurting.”

Jango rounded on him, outraged. “And what of my pain? Do you think I don’t love him—Boba?” He shook his head. “Of course I do.” Quieter: “He’s my son… but right now, I can’t look at him.”

“If Obi-Wan had been baseline human, it would’ve killed him quickly and cleanly,” Myles said. “If he’d been anyone else, you’d be proud of Boba right now.”

Jango’s gaze went cold. “Get out.”

Myles lifted his hands and backed away.

Jango turned back to Obi-Wan; so pale, barely holding on. Twin hearts or not, his circulatory system had a breach.

They were losing him, and there was nothing Jango could do. He paced the observation room while the med team worked—desperate, furious. Unfathomable, that it would be his Runi’oyay’dinuir… after everything he’d done to prevent this.

The door hissed. The Armorer entered. Jango barely glanced up before resuming his circuit. “If you’re here to tell me I’ve failed—”

“I am not,” she said, speaking over him.

“Then what do you want, Armorer? As you can see, I might lose him; and then everything else.”

“You had them remove the suppressor?”

“Of course.” He all but snarled, enraged at the interruption of his pain.

“I have been poring over the ancient writings of our people.”

Jango let her speak—too exhausted to fight the unfightable woman.

“In the oldest accounts, before our fall into darkness, those the Manda blessed had the ability to heal.”

That snapped his attention. He turned. “How?” he asked, voice unsteady.

“My understanding is this: the sire and the bearer must rest chest to chest, skin to skin.”

Jango flicked a hand. “And?”

For the first time, she sounded unsure. “I cannot parse every symbol. The codex shows two figures lying chest to chest, a light enveloping them. The marginal script speaks of *kyr’am’jor*—intent, will, direction. I believe you may be able to shape the bond to heal him.”

She hadn't finished before Jango was already stripping off his shirt and storming out of observation into the theatre, the Armorer on his heels.

Mij, who was assisting, looked up in surprise as Jango burst in half-dressed, the Armorer, *thankfully*, still fully clothed.

Jango pointed at Obi-Wan. "I'm going to try something. You can monitor if you like."

He stepped forward, but Mij blocked him. "What the kriff! No. Let us do our jobs!"

"I don't have time for this!" Jango shouted, shoving Mij; who shoved back, shockingly hard.

"We are trying to SAVE HIM!" Mij roared.

"SO AM I!" Jango shot back.

The Armorer lifted a hand. "Let the Mand'alor do as he must. It is written… it is the Way."

Mij did a double take, then shook his head. "Manda help me. I've kept him alive this long; I'm not giving in now!"

Jango caught Mij's face in one gloved hand. "I am doing this. The Armorer—"

"You've actually fallen for her bantha dung?" Mij snapped. "It's not real. He's not your soul-anything, Mand'alor. Think—"

Jango's voice went cold. "Move."

Mij knew that tone. He lifted his hands and stepped back. "It's your loss," he said, standing down. The others followed suit.

Obi-Wan lay open on the table. One of his hearts had been scored in multiple places; brain injury was a risk. Unbearable. Unacceptable.

Jango vaulted onto the table with practiced ease, bracing through his core to keep his weight off Obi-Wan as he lowered himself chest to chest. Skin met skin. The contact felt as it always did: a pleasant heat blooming under his sternum, sunlight pouring through a long-sealed window.

He followed it.

He lowered his forehead to Obi-Wan's, matched their breathing until it became one rhythm.

At first, nothing. Obi-Wan's skin was cold. If not for the bond's warmth, Jango might've believed him already gone.

Then the world shifted further away. He let it go and sank.

Light flooded him. He was inside the bond. They were one. It was overwhelming.

That was when he felt the intruder- a presence in his Runi'oyay'dinuir that did not belong. Jango set his will like beskar and forced the bond to his shape, steel-hard intent snapping the lines into alignment. Obey.

The change hit before he opened his eyes. Heat flushed Obi-Wan's skin; his breathing eased. The incision field where the team had been working was closed, blood drying around clean, whole flesh.

Jango slid off the table into a room gone silent. The medics stared; Mij's mouth hung open. Monitors leveled. Hands checked. It had worked.

Jango turned to the Armorer and inclined his head. "You have my thanks," he said. "Reattach the suppressor - there's another Force-user interacting with him."

Then the floor tilted, and he toppled sideways into the waiting dark.

Chapter 21: Under Stress

Boba sat stiffly in the hard durasteel chair. The table, also durasteel, was bolted to the floor, a ring welded at its center where his binders clipped in. He pulled his spine as straight as it would go, pushed back on his feet, trying to gain as much hight as he could. It didn't help. The Mandalorian across from him, encased head-to-toe in beskar, dwarfed him without effort.

The room hummed with air recyclers. Somewhere behind the mirrored wall they were watching him, his buir probably, The mando's bodycam gave a quiet double-beep as he tapped it on.

"Interview starting," he said, voice even. "Time stamp synced. I'm Tor Varik. Water on the left. If you need a break, ask and I'll log it."

Boba scowled at the visor, at his own small reflection swimming in it, then past it to the blank wall. "Tell me if he's alive." The words came out raw. "If Obi-Wan's alive, just say it."

Varik didn't look away. He didn't fill the silence. He adjusted his posture instead—subtle, straightening to match Boba's stiff spine. "You've got a sense about him," he said at last. "For now, that will have to do, we'll come back to confirmations later. Right now, we need answers, we need to understand what happened."

Boba's jaw worked. He didn't want to talk about senses. He wanted an answer. He set his chin. "Fine. But this is stupid."

Varik nodded like he'd expected that. "We're going to go in order. Last hour before you saw the knife. Tell it like a holo, start to finish. No skipping. Names as you remember them." A beat. "This is your account, tell it as you know it."

Boba glanced at the ring on the table, at the way the binders clipped to it, not to him. He could move his hands a little. Not free, but not humiliated. That helped, and he hated that it helped.

He swallowed. "I woke up late," he started, eyes sliding toward the mirrored wall before he dragged them back. "Tutors've got me on language drills. I had breakfast; off-brand shuura, not as good as Kiros. I went to blaster maintenance. Then the hall monitor nagged me about Mando'a verbs. I skipped kata."

Varik only said: "Logged. Keep going."

"I went to look for—" He shut his mouth. No names yet. That would be easy, too easy.

Varik didn't pounce. He set his gauntlets flat on the table, palms open, a deliberate slow gesture. "Baseline noted," he said. "Now the decision point. The moment the idea formed."

Boba's mouth went dry. He hunched a little, then caught himself and straightened again because he would not look small. "Everyone keeps acting like I'm… like I'm some little kid.

Like I can't see what's happening. They've got him wearing that thing." He jerked his chin toward his own wrist, bare. "If I asked my buir to take it off, he'd say later. It's always later. Nobody listens. Not to him and not to me, and yeah I hate him, but also, I don't think he'd mind it too much… dying" He sniffed hard. "So, I listened to us both."

Varik inclined his helmet, just a fraction. "You wanted to be useful."

Boba glared. "I am useful."

"I hear you," Varik said, and he sounded like he meant it. "Materials acquisition. How did the knife get to your hand?"

Boba hesitated. The room felt too bright. "I stole it from class," he muttered. "suck back in after everyone'd gone. No one saw." He looked up with a flash of pride he couldn't quite swallow. "I can walk a corridor without making a sound."

"Logged," Varik said. "That's competence. Opportunity?"

"I knew the rotation," Boba said, faster now, because this was a story he could tell: the pathing, the timing, the way the guard's attention bobbed on a schedule. "Two internal checkpoints, six steps past the service cut-through, there's a blind angle if you don't stand flush to the rail. I waited for the ding on the lift shaft and moved when they looked. No one expects a kid to be on the wrong side of a threshold."

Varik didn't praise him. He didn't scold him either. "Action," he said. "Minute by minute."

Boba's throat tightened. "He was right there," he said, and the words came out thin as filament. "Right there. Pale. Still. He didn't look like… like Obi-Wan." He swallowed. "I thought… if I did something big, buir would have to fix it. He'd have no choice but to... He'd —" His breath skipped. "I cut where the med readout showed. I didn't… I didn't think it would be that much blood." He stared at the tabletop. "I didn't think."

Silence pressed for a heartbeat. Varik let it be. When he spoke, it was steady. "Post-action. Who did you look for?"

"Buir," Boba said instantly. He could feel the heat rising along the bridge of his nose, the prickle behind his eyes he refused to let fall. "But he wasn't there. He's never there when—" He shut his mouth again, teeth clicking on the word.

Varik gave the bodycam another small tap. Double-beep. "For the record," he said, voice neutral, "food and water may be offered during this interview. They are not contingent on cooperation." He looked to the mirrored wall and tilted his chin. A slot opened; a tray slid through. Shuura slices, broth, water. Favorites. All catalogued.

Boba's stomach betrayed him with a low, humiliating twist. He put his mouth hard and high and lifted his chin. "I can eat later."

"Your call," Varik said. "If you do eat, keep air moving while you chew."

Boba snorted, then took the cup anyway, because dignity didn't fill an empty gut. He drank, eyes on the visor.

"Better?" Varik asked after a minute.

Boba set the cup down with exaggerated care. "You're trying to be my friend," he said, disgust and a child's shrewdness in equal parts. "So I'll tell you something stupid."

"I'm not your friend," Varik said, without heat. "I'm the one writing the report. If there are gaps I can't reconcile, I escalate and you lose say in the write-up. If you walk me through it clean, your voice is in the file."

Boba hated how much sense that made. He stuffed a bite of shuura into his mouth, chewed with his mouth open just to be awful, and nearly coughed when the syrup hit the wrong way. He clutched his throat and wheezed, eyes watering.

Varik didn't lunge. He didn't circle the table. He lifted a hand, palm out. "Medical, stand by," he said to the glass, voice level. He considered moving around the table to assist, but decided against it.

Boba spat a mess of half-chewed fruit back into the tray and barked a laugh. "Should've seen your face! Kriffing idiot."

Varik looked at him for a long two seconds. "Noted," he said, and reached to the side to press the chime. "Sanitation. Replace the tray." He didn't sound angry. He sounded… tired. "We'll also log that you can act under stress. Now…" he looked down at some message he'd gotten on his vambrace, he nodded and then looked back up at at Boba "Lets keep going."

Boba blinked. He'd expected shouting. Threats. The tray slid out; a fresh one slid in. The deck droid's brush whirred, wiping the splatter from the floor. The bodycam double-beeped again… new segment.

"You must miss those days," Varik said as if nothing had happened. "Running wild. No tutors riding your shebs."

Boba hunched, then caught himself, dragging his shoulders back, trying to look older and less… whatever this was. "I miss my buir," he said, and it came out honest before he could sand it down.

Varik nodded in acknowledgement. "You've met a lot of interesting people," he said, casual as an afternoon spent lounging on a beach. "Before Sundari. Any of them in contact since you arrived?"

Boba's eyes narrowed. "No," he said, sharper than he needed to. "I'm not stupid. You want names."

"I want your version," Varik said. "If I write this up like you were copying someone else, it reads petty. If you were making a tactical call to protect your buir, say that. In your words."

Boba stared at him. The binder ring clicked faintly as he shifted his hands. Something in his chest—pride, stubbornness—untwisted by a hair. “It was my idea,” he muttered. “No one told me. I watched the rotations. I took the knife. I did it. Because he’s not listening and someone has to make him.”

Varik didn’t look satisfied. He just logged it. “We’ll test that against the cams,” he said. “Phase evidence later. For now: after. Who spoke to you first?”

Boba’s mouth tightened. “Mij.”

“Exact words you remember,” Varik said. “Then I’ll read back your account.”

Boba recited the cadence of it—the shocked curse, the hands on his shoulders, the barked orders over the comm. As he spoke, the room seemed to grow a little less bright, a little less like a stage. It was just a place where words landed and were caught.

When he finished, Varik looked down at his vambrace and scrolled. “Okay,” he said. “Playback of your own account. Correct anything I get wrong; if you want to add, say ‘addendum’ and I’ll insert it.”

He read it back, not fast, not slow. He didn’t dramatize. When he reached the part with the knife, he didn’t look up. When he reached the part where Boba had said I miss my buir, he didn’t pause.

At the end Varik tapped the bodycam. Double-beep. “Account recorded,” he said. “Evaluation phase. Here’s what happens next. I escalate for review because of injury severity. You will have at least another session with me at a later date. You will have food and water again; not contingent. You are a minor, so sessions stay short. You can request a break at any time.”

Boba’s throat felt thick. He swallowed it down. “Are you going to tell me if he’s…” He couldn’t finish it.

Varik’s voice didn’t change. “When there’s something I can confirm, you’ll hear it through the right channel,” he said. “Until then… you said you can sense him. Keep your eyes on that.”

Boba stared at the visor hard enough to burn a hole through it. He hated Varik. He hated the room. He hated the mirror, the way his shoulders ached from sitting too straight for too long.

He also hated that the knot in his gut had loosened just enough for him to breathe. He knew Obi-Wan was alive and he should not be relieved about that. He could feel that light, dim. Far away. But still there. An annoying itch in an un-scratchable place inside his brain.

Varik stood, slow, deliberate, no sudden moves. “We’re done for now,” he said. “Guard will escort you back. If you remember something between now and the next session, tell the escort; it gets logged. You’ll have a meal and a flight block.”

Boba couldn’t help it. “You think I’m a bad person?”

Varik paused with a hand on the door. “I think you’re an ad who made a tactical call to protect your buir,” he said. “And I think consequences still happen. Both can be true.”

The door slid open on a soft hiss. The bodycam double-beeped as the recording ended. Boba lifted his chin, set his jaw, and let the guards take him, back straight, steps long, tall as he could make himself. He was not a child. He would not be written like one.

Ahsoka’s legs wouldn’t stop bouncing.

Anakin was in custody. Obi-Wan was either dead or close. The old instinct said: meditate, give it to the Force, empty out and drift.

No.

That wasn’t her way anymore.

She stood in the corridor, jaw tight, hands opening and closing like she could wring the panic out of her fingers. She’d been trained to release, to accept, to float. Now she was trying to ride the swell instead of dissolving in it; and it was kriffing hard.

Don’t vanquish the feelings. Learn them. Live with them.

Ventress blew through the doorway like a stormfront. “Meditate already. Your teenage angst is echoing down the halls; put a lid on it.”

Ahsoka frowned. “I thought—”

“You thought wrong.” Ventress folded her arms. “You still meditate. You just don’t dump it in the Force and call that wisdom. Use the feelings to steer. You decide. Not the Force.”

Ahsoka hesitated, breath catching high in her chest. “Okay,” she said, not at all sure how.

Ventress rolled her eyes and jerked her chin toward a quiet room. “Sit. I’ll guide.”

They settled on the floor. The lights hummed. Ahsoka’s shoulders stayed up by her ears until Ventress touched two fingers to her shoulder blade, then withdrew.

“Name it,” Ventress said, voice low. “One word.”

Ahsoka stared at the floor seam. “Fear.”

“Where?”

“Chest.” She tapped sternum. Her hands trembled; she flattened them to her thighs.

“Direct it.”

Ahsoka swallowed. “Scout the horizon. Find where I can help.”

“Good,” Ventress said. “Let fear be a lookout, not a captain. Breathe: in four, out six.”

Ahsoka breathed. The air came in thin at first, then steadier.

“Next wave.”

“Rage,” Ahsoka said, throat tight.

“Where?”

“Throat.”

“Direct.”

She closed her eyes. “Turn it into spine.”

Ventress’s mouth ticked. “Better. Rage as brace. Again. In four. Out six. Drop your shoulders.”

Ahsoka did, and some of the electric buzz under her skin eased.

“Grief,” Ventress said.

Ahsoka’s voice thinned. “Behind the eyes.”

“Direct.”

“Let it water the ground, not flood the room.”

Ventress nodded once. “Good. Stack them. Fear scouts. Rage braces. Grief softens. Breathe with all three.”

They breathed together. In four. Out six. The tide inside Ahsoka slowed, not gone - never gone - but moving where she pointed it.

“Now put names to the edges,” Ventress said. “Whose faces are you seeing?”

“Anakin,” Ahsoka whispered. “Obi-Wan.”

“Stay with ‘what,’ not ‘why,’” Ventress said. “What can you do in the next hour that is not nothing?”

Ahsoka’s fingers curled, then unfurled. “Check the patrol schedule. Send a secure note to the training ward. Eat something gentle.” She grimaced. “My stomach’s a mess.”

“Good,” Ventress said. “Body before heroics. Again: name, place, direct.”

Ahsoka nodded. “Guilt. Belly. Direct it to a list; three tasks I can actually complete.”

“Shame?”

“Jaw.” Ahsoka unclenched it. “Direct: release it on the exhale. Shame has no use.”

Ventress’s voice softened a shade. “Hope?”

Ahsoka blinked. “Ribs,” she said, surprised. “Low. Direct: keep it small and warm. Pocket-sized.”

“Now we cut the drift,” Ventress said. “Pick one concrete thing. Then the next.”

Ahsoka opened her eyes. The room hadn’t changed. She had. Not much. Enough.

“What about you?” she asked. “What do you name?”

Ventress smirked. “Impatience. Hands.” She flexed them. “Direct: teach.”

Ahsoka huffed a quiet laugh. It didn’t fix anything. But it loosened something.

“Again,” Ventress said. “Three rounds. Same list. Then you stand up and do the first task. If a new wave hits, you sit back down and run it again. That’s the practice. Not holiness. Habits.”

They went through it once more. Then again. By the third repetition Ahsoka’s breath came on cue, shoulders unhooked from her ears. The room felt larger.

Ventress rose first. “You don’t need the Force to steer,” she said. “You need a wheel and hands on it.”

Ahsoka stood. Her legs still felt wobbly. Fine. “Name. Place. Direct,” she said, mostly to herself.

“Look at you,” Ventress said, deadpan. “Using tools like a person.”

Ahsoka snorted. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” Ventress said, already turning away. “Do the list. Then eat something.”

Ahsoka glanced toward the corridor, the world waiting, still on fire. The waves would come back. She could meet them.

She stepped out, breathing on four, letting fear scout, rage brace, grief soften, and hope, small and warm, ride low under her ribs.

Chapter 22: The Diamond

Obi-Wan rose toward wakefulness like a swimmer breaking the surface; slow, unhurried… into an infant-quiet peace. His body lay at a lean, upper torso pillowed on hard muscle and warm skin. It should have sparked alarm. Embarrassment. Anything. It didn't. The calm was heavy and absolute, deeper than any meditation he remembered. Deeper even than—

Qui-Gon.

He'd been with Qui-Gon. Hadn't he? The thought slipped when he reached for it, like the warmth of a flame suddenly doused.

He shifted. A hand slid across his chest, one slow, soothing pass. Voices threaded the quiet. A woman.

"He is accepting your touch well."

Ice. Vexa.

His eyes snapped open. Vexa stood with an unfamiliar man; several guards ringed the room. A medical room. Memory struck.

He lurched forward, hands flying to his abdomen; beneath his ribs; searching for torn flesh, for ruin, for—

Nothing.

Arms hauled him back, flat against that chest again, and he knew whose it was. Of course he knew. The gall.

That explained the peace. That soft, treacherous safety blooming in his mind even as he tried to sit, to peel himself out of it, to escape the lie of it.

"You're safe," Jango murmured against his temple. "I'm here. I've got you, Runi'oyay'dinuir. Don't fight me."

A small, traitorous sound slipped out of Obi-Wan's throat; humiliatingly close to a whimper. He didn't have the strength to break those arms. Or to fight the warmth rolling through him. He sagged back. His breath obeyed the Mand'alor before he could choose for himself.

"That's it," Jango said, pleased. "I've got you."

The hands returned, steady across sternum and belly; gentle, insistent. Heat spread in soft waves. His mind named them lies, hands stained with the deaths of thousands of his people, but his ribs still rose, unbidden, like a trained thing, as Jango's fingers traced them.

"Good," said the unfamiliar man, eyes on a slate. "Positive neuroactivity confirmed. Touch correlates strongly with the phenomenon. His response appears involuntary; he resists at

intervals but cannot pull free of the effect."

Jango laughed, the vibration running through Obi-Wan's spine in a shiver he couldn't stop. "It takes a little force at times, but I wouldn't expect anything less from my Runi'oyay'dinuir," he said, proud.

"Please… let me up," Obi-Wan managed. "I need… please." The grief hit like surf—thick, choking. He tried to curl away, to kick himself free. Jango was ready; legs and arms wrapped him, mouth at his ear.

"Shhhhh, cyar'ika… shhhh. It's okay. I've got you."

Vexa's gaze flicked to Obi-Wan's face, then - just once - to the beskar band on his wrist. "Duration?"

"Stable so long as contact is maintained," the man replied. "Amplitude drops when he attempts disengagement."

Obi-Wan twisted his shoulder away. For a heartbeat the warmth frayed. Then Jango's palm spread over his sternum, thumb settling at the notch of his throat, and the calm flooded back, infuriatingly clean.

"Enough demonstrations," Vexa said, breaking rank. "He is not an instrument…"

"Then stop playing me like one," Obi-Wan rasped, voice raw. He gathered what steel he had left. "Get your hands off me, Mand'alor." A beat later, smaller: "Don't… touch me."

Jango didn't oblige. His mouth ticked, not quite a smile. "Every time I let go, your adrenaline spikes." Softer: "Breathe for me."

"I am not…" he started, but the breath had already answered, syncing to the slow rise and fall beneath his cheek. Treacherous. So treacherous.

"Document that," Vexa said to the tech without looking away. "External pacing; compliance under duress."

"Logged," the man murmured.

Jango's hand paused over the knit of bone beneath Obi-Wan's clavicle. "You're whole," he said, quiet, certain. "Stay with me."

Obi-Wan shut his eyes against the heat gathering there. "I don't want—" He swallowed, the sound uneven in the quiet. "Your peace."

"Not mine," Jango said, sliding his bare palm back to Obi-Wan's ribs. "Ours."

Then, to the room: "Everyone out."

They hesitated.

“I have it managed,” he added. “Guard him all you like; outside the room.”

Reluctantly, they filed out. Vexa paused at the door. “I will submit myself for disciplinary.”

“See that you do,” Jango said, cold.

Obi-Wan wanted to beg her to stay. He didn’t. Begging would get her removed from the household, and he’d just seen a crack he might use. The door sealed with a decisive thrum.

In the hush that followed, the only sound was his own uneven swallow.

Jango’s legs were still crossed around Obi-Wans own. One arm wrapped around Obi-Wan’s torso…. But what sent Obi-Wan into a panic again wasn’t that. It was the thing pressed into his back. He knew what it was. “no.” he tried again. But then another wave of peace hit him. His body relaxed under Jango’s encouragement.

Jango dipped one of his hands lower and slid along the edge of Obi-Wan’s smalls. “no” obi-wan whispered.

“shhhh, you’re okay, this will help you.” But Jango’s voice was ragged and that did nothing to encourage Obi-Wan.

Then suddenly Jango’s legs released him, and he was being dragged back again. Seeing his chance and threw himself sideways again. He stumbled onto the ground with a hard slap. Then he stumbled up and rushed for the door. He knew it was locked already… but he had to try. Jango had him pined before he could scream for help, the breath was knocked out of him, as he was slammed into the door from behind.

Jango chest was at his back and again he could feel the Mand’alor’s clothed penis pressed against his back. Jango’s mouth pressed to his ear “shhhh, you’re okay, I’m going to take care of you. I almost lost you… I almost lost my chance for… I won’t waste a second more. I know it’s a lot and I hadn’t planned to progress things this quickly. But… I can’t waste any more time.”

Obi-Wan’s body was again responding in a manner he didn’t want it to. Falling limp into Jango’s arms. Allowing Jango to drag him back towards the bed. He fumbled with his legs trying to get them to resist. Jango chuckled “though I must say, I enjoy your struggles my little warrior, always fighting the inevitable…. Always so obstinate” Jango sounded angry then. Like Obi-Wan running for the door had been a personal offense.

Jango swung him up keeping his bare palms on the back of Obi-Wan’s neck, grasping him by the nape before he clambered up and sat behind Obi-Wan again, dragged Obi-Wan back into his arms, wrapped his legs around Obi-Wan’s. “don’t go running off again Obi-Wan or I will be forced to use binders.”

Obi-Wan was falling back into the river of peace. Back into the shallows. He let himself. He let his eyes shut. Let Jango’s hand find his penis. And oh. Jango was directing the peace through Obi-Wan’s penis, and it was something else. Something warm and all consuming. It rolled through him, and the world fell away.

Jango was talking to him again, murmuring in his ears. But he couldn't understand. He was gasping and he could feel his hips move on their own, his hands clutching into fists so tight it should have hurt. Could feel Jango's thumb rub the head of his dick and felt himself scream. Scream through the tide of pleasure so intense he saw lights and fell away into the inky darkness of unconsciousness.

Jango continued rubbing his penis up and down Obi-Wan's limp back. Rubbing Obi-Wan's spend over his chest and up to his throat where he let his hand rest and then squeeze as he came so hard he fell back seeing lights so bright he tried to close his eyes against them and found them there too.

It took him a few minutes to get his breath back, lift Obi-Wan, put his own penis back into his trousers, Obi-Wan's back in his smalls. Then, call his people back in.

Maybe someone else would feel embarrassment or shame. But there was nothing in this that felt like it deserved those feelings. He had deserved this pleasure and so had Obi-Wan.

They helped him move Obi-Wan forward so he could get up and go back to his apartments for a much-deserved shower. They would see to Obi-Wan.

Vexa stood at the foot of the bed and began issuing orders without raising her voice.

"Transfer him to household now. No restraints. Sheet only. Bio-alarms to silent. Final checks in his quarters; Mij will clear him there."

Hands moved. The room breathed again. A nurse dimmed the harsh top-lights to a soft amber. Another covered the suppressor with a sleeve so it wouldn't flash in his peripheral when he woke.

She kept her gaze on Kenobi's face. He was pallid, yes, but not empty. Even under sedation there was a steadiness to his features; an economy. She had seen it in good officers and in rare ade who took to discipline like air. Polite helped; she had noticed that, too. But it was more than manners. Kindness sat under the caution. Thoughtfulness under the quiet. He did not strike without cause; even his refusals had edges he'd sanded himself rather than slash with.

"Temperature to twenty-six," Vexa said. "He runs cold post-op."

A medic glanced up, surprised she'd noticed. She didn't indulge it.

He was trainable. She would train him. He was Mandalore's now… and the Mand'alor's.

Did her Mand'alor deserve him? No. Not in her account of the world. But she did not write for the Manda; she read. The Manda marked and men obeyed. Some were given diamonds. Others, dung. It was not her place to like it.

They slid him to the gurney with a practiced count. He didn't stir. Vexa paced the side, matching the slow roll, reading the room: two guards inside the lift, two waiting on the household level; Ren already adjusting the access logs so the route would look routine. Details made order. Order made survival.

She didn't touch him. She would not. The rules were for everyone, most of all for those who thought they stood above them.

"Lights low in the master," she told Ren as the doors hissed open to the suite. "Water, warmed, care staff at the ready to bath him. Turn down the bed."

Household staff moved like a well-oiled rifle. The bed was ready; the room, already at his preferred heat. Through the window Sundari's evening threw copper across the floor. He would wake to warmth, not glass and hum.

"He brings the fight to mirrors," she said, mostly to herself. "Keep the striking post accessible. If he asks, take him to the training room, mitts visible."

Ren nodded and peeled away.

She waited while he was bathed and brought back. They settled him on the mattress. The sheet drew up to his sternum. Vexa watched the rise and fall of his chest and let herself count four cycles. She could almost hear Jango's voice in her head - possessive, certain, already too near. Proximity made obsessions worse. It always had.

She would see to it that Obi-Wan Kenobi was reasonably comfortable, educated, and prepared. Help him learn his place. That was the work she could do for him, even if it felt like handing a blade to a jeweler and telling him he was a miner now.

If only Obi-Wan had not been a Jedi. If only. With one less reason to fear him, she could have argued for less security, more line to run. As it was, the suppressor stayed; too powerful, too practiced. They were not fools.

Mij arrived at the threshold, already gloving. "Final check?"

"In here," Vexa said, and then, quieter, "I want his compliance earned, not extracted."

Mij's mouth twitched "Compliance is easier when pain isn't shouting," he said, and moved past her.

Vexa keyed her slate, opening the sedation protocol for the household wing. At the bottom, a field most officers never noticed blinked: **Authorizing Voices**. She considered a single breath. Then she added her ident alongside Mij's and set **dual-confirm** for any non-emergency sedation order originating from Mand'alor-level clearance. The audit trail would

read as a medical safeguard… too many hands on a single switch is how you kill a patient by mistake. Nothing more.

“Anything else?” Ren asked from the door.

“Yes. Replace the top shelf in the study,” Vexa said, as if this were about furniture and not fault lines. “Tactics texts, not philosophy. He’ll feel less mocked.”

Ren logged it.

Vexa took one last look at Kenobi. The diamond lay quiet in the bed of a forge he had not chosen. Her job was to keep the temperature true and the hammer strikes counted. And to know exactly where the seams were when the day came that the forge needed to open.

“Log transfer complete,” she said. “Stand down to gallery presence.”

They filed out. The door sealed. Vexa held her slate until it vibrated with confirmation: household control engaged, medical on standby, security at two-metre arcs, hands visible.

She walked away, back straight, the metronome in her chest steady as a march.

Chapter 23: Beskar Hearts

Chapter Notes

> A little message to let everyone know that I'm away for the next couple weeks. As such I won't be able to write during that time. In good news I have most of the next chapter written so when I do arrive home it will only take a day or two to complete it and get it posted.

Boba shuffled into the larger room, chains forcing his stride short. The chair waiting for him was durasteel, bolted like everything else. He sat because the guards pushed, not because he wanted to. Across the table, Jango didn't sit until Boba was down; helmet on, posture loose, like all this bored him.

It didn't. Boba could tell from the way the visor stayed on him and nowhere else.

"Want to explain," Jango said, voice cold by design, "why my own son would try to destroy everything I've built for him?"

Boba bared his teeth. Good. Let him see the fangs. "You're not my father. You're a liar."

He saw Jango's shoulders shift a fraction, and felt satisfaction stir within.

"I know what I am," Boba went on, chin high. "I've known for ages."

"What are you on about?" Jango asked. "Of course you're my son."

Boba gave him the evils through his fringe. "I heard you and Kenobi. One of those nights you were 'thanking' him. You thought I was asleep." He jerked his chin at the ceiling. "I'd rigged the surveillance feed to my datapad."

Silence rippled under the visor. Boba hated that the first thing he felt was a hot flicker of pride from Jango, like a hand clapping his shoulder. It made him angrier.

"What did you hear?" Jango asked.

"That I'm a clone." The word tasted like metal. "Should've been obvious—every cadet looks like me."

"And that makes you not my son how?" Jango leaned back a little, voice even. "Who raised you?"

Boba stared at the tabletop. "You."

“Who taught you everything you know?”

“You.”

“Who loves you?”

He hated that the answer lodged in his throat. “You?” Boba risked a glance up, needy and furious at being needy.

Jango lifted his brows. “Do you question that?”

Boba looked away, jaw tight. The chains clinked when he moved. “You lied,” he muttered. “You should’ve told me.”

Jango took off the helmet then; set it on the table with a solid clunk. He didn’t look like a god or a monster without it. He looked tired. Human. “You’re right,” he said. “I should have. That’s on me.”

Boba hadn’t prepared for that answer. He’d armed himself for denial, for anger; everything but simple agreement.

Jango nodded at the guards without looking. “Off.” The binders clicked. The guards withdrew to the door.

Boba rubbed his wrists and tried not to let the relief show. “Doesn’t change anything.”

“It changes the lie,” Jango said. “Not the vow.” He leaned forward, forearms on the table. “Being a clone means I share your face. It doesn’t decide who your buir is. Son is a promise, not a genome.”

Boba’s mouth twitched. “You made me in a vat.”

“And then I made your breakfasts.” Jango’s tone stayed level. “I taught you to fly, to shoot, to swear in three languages, to pick a mark and keep your hands clean. I sat with you through fever nights on Kamino and the first time you cracked a rib and lied about it. I told you stories about Jaster when you couldn’t sleep. I was there.”

Boba swallowed; uneven; it annoyed him that Jango would hear it. “You’re different,” he said, low. “Since him.”

The air in the room changed. Jango didn’t flinch. “Kenobi.”

Boba’s hands curled. “You pick him. Over me.”

“No.” The answer was so immediate Boba almost believed it. “I chose Mandalore. I chose a future where my people aren’t chattel. Obi-Wan is part of that future; and he’s mine in a way I don’t expect you to like. But hear me: I don’t trade my son for anyone.”

“Then why was I in chains?” Boba shot back. “Why won’t anyone tell me if he’s dead?”

“Because you put a blade in his chest,” Jango said, finally letting heat into his voice. “Because you’re thirteen and you almost killed the Mand’alor’s soulbearer on my floor.”

Boba lifted his chin. “I did it for you.”

Jango’s stare sharpened. “You did it because you were hurting and jealous and someone whispered a story in your ear about what would make me proud.” A beat. “Who?”

Boba pressed his lips together.

Jango didn’t bark. He didn’t threaten. “You think I don’t know the shape of that pain?” he asked, softer. “I lost my buir too young. I was angry for years. I made choices I can’t take back. Don’t make mine again.”

Silence. The vent hummed. A camera blinked red in the corner.

“You’re going to answer my intelligence officer,” Jango said at last. “Not because you’re a coward, but because you’re a Mandalorian and we clean our own mess. Largo will take your statement.” He let that sit, then added, “Consequences are coming. Grounded. Flight block suspended. Restricted access. Extra instruction. You will not go near Obi-Wan again without my leave. Ever.”

Boba’s throat worked. “And if he takes you from me?”

Jango’s mouth twitched like the ghost of a smile. “He already gives you more of me than anyone else has, ad’ika. He makes me better. You don’t have to like him. You do have to leave him be.”

Boba stared at his hands. The knuckles were still scabbed from the last bad idea. “What am I then?” he asked, so quiet Jango almost missed it. “If I’m a clone. If I’m not… special.”

“You’re Boba Fett,” Jango said. “Ori’jate enough for any three sons. And you’re mine.”

Boba’s eyes flicked up, angry shine turned blurry. He hated that too. “You promise?”

Jango didn’t reach for him; he didn’t risk touch as comfort, not here, not so soon after he’d almost lost everything because; of his own son. He simply held his son’s gaze. “I promise.”

Boba sniffed hard and tried to look like it was nothing. “Fine,” he said, surly on purpose. “I’ll talk to Largo.”

“Good.” Jango stood, palming the helmet. “You will also apologize to Obi-Wan when he’s well enough to ignore you. You’ll mean it. And you’ll earn back the sky one hour at a time.”

Boba muttered something obscene and wiped at his face with the heel of his hand. “Can I go now?”

Jango inclined his head to the guards. “Escort him to holding two. No cuffs.” He set the helmet on, voice returning to iron. “We’ll speak again after you’ve told the truth.”

Boba let himself be led. At the threshold he hesitated…only a heartbeat.

Jango didn't miss it. "Boba."

His son glanced back.

"Verd ori'shya beskar," Jango said. "A heart is stronger than beskar." A beat. "Use yours."

Boba rolled his eyes so hard it almost hurt. But he went… he finally felt a licker of hope.

Obi-Wan woke in the usual way: the soft chime, the whisper of doors, Vexa's silhouette in the frame.

But she was… strange today. Still as a statue, eyes fixed on him like she was waiting for a particular storm to hit.

He pushed upright, careful of the knit in his shoulder. The room looked ordinary: clothes laid out, datapad blinking the morning's schedule; but something in the air felt… reset. Slightly too quiet. As if a conversation had been erased and the room was pretending not to notice.

Vexa didn't step in. "Orientation," she said, voice even. "State your name."

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Location."

"Sundari, Mandalore."

"Today's date."

He answered. She held his gaze half a breath longer than necessary, then inclined her head.

"Schedule," she said, turning crisply into the hall. He followed, and she recited it on the move, medical check at oh-eight, briefing with Ren, supervised training slot pending Mij's sign-off, breakfast with household. Nothing unusual. Still, she kept glancing at him like she'd practiced this path a hundred times and was waiting for a hidden step to catch his boot.

"Did something happen?" he asked at last.

"Last night you slept," Vexa said. "Today you'll eat."

Not an answer. She didn't offer one.

The breakfast table was already set when they arrived. Cody, Kira, Ren, Waxer, Boil. Mij drifted near the far monitor, pretending not to watch. Vexa guided him to his chair with a small gesture and took her usual place at his six.

He reached for the tea without thinking, setting cup and saucer just so. A familiar ritual; one that usually settled him… but the first inhale of steam slid through him like air in a room that wasn't sealed right. He blinked.

"Good morning, Obi-Wan," Cody said, neutral.

"Morning," he returned, even. He lifted the teapot, poured. The angle was wrong; he caught himself before it overspilled and set it down a fraction too carefully.

"Pain?" Mij asked, all clinic.

"No."

"Pressure? Light-headedness?"

"No."

He realized he was answering a couple second's late. The world had a soft edge: sounds half a second off, light a shade too bright, as if Sundari's dome had shifted the sun.

"Your tunic looks tidy, but you have choses one with plenty of room" Kira offered, too cheerfully. "Mij cleared light work if you choose training later."

"Fine," he said, then forced, "thank you."

He reached for the honey and froze. His hand hovered, waiting for… something. A cue that didn't arrive. He lowered it and stared at the tea instead. It smelled like home and nowhere at once.

"Obi-Wan," Vexa said, very quietly. "If the room feels far, say 'Hold.'"

He looked up. "Why would the room feel far?"

"Because sometimes it does," she replied. "It's an option."

He meant to snort at that- at the tidy phrasing of a leash as a kindness, but the air recycler's hum got suddenly loud, and Boil's fork scraped his plate in a sound that stretched too long. For a heartbeat the table receded, tilt and distance, as if someone had rolled him a meter backward from his own life.

"Obi-Wan," Vexa said, same tone, very precise. "Name."

He blinked. "Obi-Wan."

"Place."

“Sundari.”

“Direct.”

He searched for something that wasn’t obedience. “Drink,” he said. He lifted the cup and took a slow sip. The heat drew him down into his body, the tongue, the swallow, the small ache where the suppressor sat like a bad idea he couldn’t quite dislodge.

The room slid a half-step closer.

“Logged,” Ren murmured from down the table, tapping his slate.

Waxer tried a soft landing. “You slept hard,” he said. “Good sign.”

“Did I.” He didn’t make it a question, but it wasn’t an answer either.

Mij cleared his throat. “Last check in medical was unremarkable.”

“Last check,” Obi-Wan repeated, tasting the phrase. His eyes flicked to Vexa. “What’s the last thing you remember from yesterday evening?”

The question landed harder than he intended. Waxer’s jaw tightened. Cody’s gaze went steady. Vexa didn’t look away.

“You ate,” she said. “You read for a time. You slept.”

“And before that?”

“Training room.”

He studied her. She didn’t blink.

He looked down at his hands, there was a small tremor in the right, barely there. He curled it around the cup to hide it and felt, as if from a great distance, the echo of a palm at his sternum and a thumb resting at the notch of his throat. The phantom of warmth bloomed and vanished, too quick to name.

“Will the Mand’alor be attending breakfast?” he asked, too casually.

“Not this morning,” Vexa said.

Not an answer. Not really. He set his cup down, aligning handle with saucer with ridiculous care.

Kira started to recite the midday schedule - physio blocks, a short briefing with Ren… and he found himself nodding in the places a polite man nods when a list is being read. The words sluiced past without catching. A little later he realized he had eaten half the fruit on his plate without tasting any of it.

The air shifted. He'd lost seconds again… ten? Thirty? He couldn't tell. The edges of the room felt faintly muffled, as if he were looking through a pane that hadn't been cleaned.

"Obi-Wan," Vexa said, the slightest notch gentler. "Feet."

He put both on the floor.

"Back."

He pressed his shoulder blades into the chair.

"Breathe on four."

He obeyed.

"Direct."

He glanced down. "Toast," he said, and took a slow bite. Chew, swallow, sip. The world clicked a fraction closer, enough to see Cody deliberately angle his hands on the table -empty, visible, non-threat. Enough to notice Mij looking away like a man trying not to intrude on a private indignity.

"Good," Vexa said, barely audible. Not to praise. To mark a box.

He set the toast down and wiped his fingers on the linen; too carefully again. "You're all staring," he said, aiming for lightness and missing.

"We're observing," Ren corrected. "There's a difference."

He didn't laugh.

The rest of the meal passed in measured sentences. No one used the words he wanted to hear… last night everything was normal, everything was fine. He was just imagining their tenseness. He finished his tea. He did not ask for more.

When he stood, Vexa rose in the same movement. "We'll walk," she said simply. "Then medical."

"Am I permitted to remember medical?" Obi-Wan asked, too mild.

"If you don't," Vexa said, "we'll brief you."

He smiled without humor. "How generous."

"Necessary," she returned.

They moved. Guards fell in, hands visible, silent. In the corridor's glass a man stared back; clean, upright, unruffled … and Obi-Wan had the sudden, disorienting thought that he was watching someone play him extremely well.

He didn't say "Hold." He kept walking.

After hand-off at medical, Vexa stopped in the anteroom and braced her palms on the console. The slate recorded her voice without inflection.

“Household log. Runi’oyay’dinuir presented with dissociative features at breakfast. Delayed response latency, derealization, two micro-absences under thirty seconds each. Grounding successful with name/place/direct and somatic cues. No agitation. Memory gap persists for previous evening. Recommend: reduce exposure to high-amplitude stimuli seventy-two hours; avoid unscheduled contact with Mand’alor; add extra orientation checks at wake and before lights.”

She paused. The cursor waited.

She added, quieter, “Dignity remains a constraint,” and sent it.

For a long breath she stared at the closed door to medical, jaw set too tight to be indifference. Then she turned on her heel and went to rewrite the day.

Chapter 24: Nothing Happened

Obi-Wan noticed the wrongness first… a high, brittle hum in the med lights tickling inside his brain; warning him of danger. He touched thumb to ring finger twice; a habit he didn't remember starting, and the room edged a fraction closer.

Mij stepped into view with a tray. "Good morning," he said, even. "Let's start easy. I'm going to check the incision sites and the hand knit. Announcing touch. Forearm, left."

He reached; and his gloved fingers drifted too near the band.

Obi-Wan's body moved before thought. He swung for Mij's jaw. Mij snapped back, barely missing it; the tray clipped the rail and clattered. The swing carried Obi-Wan a step past balance; he had to catch himself.

The sound arrived a beat late, like it had to cross a long hallway to reach him.

"Red zone," one of the guards barked. "Medbay three."

Obi-Wan was already on his feet. The band felt like a snare burning his pulse. He didn't know why his heart had detonated; only that it had. "Don't touch me," he rasped, breath chopping. "Stay away—"

Vexa hit the threshold at a run and decelerated on a dime, palms up, empty. "Obi-Wan. I'm here. No one is grabbing you. Words first." She didn't look away from him as she spoke to the room. "Contain without touch."

The guards widened their arcs. Hands visible. No one rushed him.

"Two options," Vexa continued, voice metronome-steady. "We walk to the bed and I keep everyone three paces back while you sit, or I clear the corridor and you stand in the doorway to breathe for sixty seconds. Which do you choose?"

"I choose you get out," he snapped. The high hum had become a blade. His skin felt too small. He saw the line to the door and took it, chair catching his heel; he seized it and threw. It skidded, hit the wall, rang like a struck bell.

"Escalation," Vexa said, loud, fast, calm. "Obi-Wan, last warning. Use your code if you need a pause. Say 'Hold' and all hands freeze unless you're falling."

"Don't you...use my..." The words shredded. He lunged for the exit.

"Act," Vexa ordered, and the room moved.

Avoiding his wrists, two guards caught his upper arms high, pulling in at matching angles; a third set a forearm across his hips without pinning the ribs Tarla had repaired. He was pushed backwards into the medbed and held there. Boots braced. Controlled, minimum force.

He fought like a drowning man, breath tearing, the world tunnelling. “Get off—get off—get off—”

“Obi-Wan,” Mij said from his right, measured, close enough to hear, far enough not to crowd. His tone had changed; it was all clinic now, none of the old contempt. “I’m not touching you. I’m at two o’clock, one meter. I need to examine your incision. Requesting permission for a small anxiolytic to help you regulate.”

“Denied,” Obi-Wan hissed, twisting. The suppressor flashed cold against his skin. “No drugs —”

Vexa’s gaze ran the calculus: recent osteo-repair, spiked vitals, attempt to flee, thrown object, restraint already in play. “Mij, state dose and route.”

“Low-dose anxiolytic, intranasal. Onset under a minute; no dissociation, no amnesia—you’ll remain verbal,” Mij said, still naming the ground as he walked it. “Side effect: metallic taste. I will narrate each step.”

“Authorized,” Vexa said. “Announce. Ask. Act.”

Mij kept his hands visible until he was in Obi-Wan’s line of sight. “I’m lifting the applicator now. Right hand only. Not touching you. I’m going to bring it to your right nostril. Breathe out. If you need me to pause, say ‘Hold.’”

“Don’t—” Obi-Wan’s voice broke. Something raw and small punched up out of his chest and he hated it, hated it, hated it. “Please just... don’t touch me—”

“No one will touch you who isn’t required to,” Vexa said at once. “Logged.”

Mij angled the sprayer in, careful as a bomb tech. “Three, two, one.” A clean hiss. “Second pass.” Another. He withdrew, palms open. “Done.”

Obi-Wan sagged a fraction against the set of bodies holding him. The hum in the lights didn’t stop, but it dulled at the edges, like rain behind a door. He touched thumb to ring finger, once. Twice.

“Good,” Vexa said; the others knew she meant: situation stabilising. “We’re going to transition to seated. Left side first. Counting down. Three… two…”

The guards shifted like choreography; upper arms only; lowering him to the bed. They released in sequence and stepped back to their two-meter marks.

Mij stayed where Obi-Wan could see him. “Announcing approach,” he said. “Examining the hand knit visually. No touch.” He bent, eyes only, hands still, then narrated what he saw to the room rather than to Obi-Wan. “Minimal scarring, no sign of knit rejection.”

A shadow crossed the doorway.

Jango; helm off, jaw set, stopped at the threshold. “I’m here for the thoracic and cardiac sweep,” he said, voice controlled. “Subcostal pass at the stab site. Both hearts.” His gaze cut

to Mij.

Obi-Wan flinched like he'd been struck. "No." Too fast. Too loud. "There's nothing there. Nothing happened. There is nothing there... do you hear me?"

"I was easing him into it," Mij explained, strained.

Vexa's eyes flicked to his vitals: spike. "Mand'alor," she said without turning, "your presence elevates his adrenaline. Hold position outside the three-meter line."

Jango's nostrils flared. He stayed.

Mij didn't move an inch closer. "Obi-Wan," he said, same calm tempo. "Requesting permission to scan without touch. Handheld wand will remain five to ten centimetres off your skin. I'll name each pass. You can watch on the screen. If you need a pause, say 'Hold.'"

Obi-Wan's breath chopped. "There's nothing there," he repeated, smaller now, frantic at the edges. "Don't make me... don't—"

"Noted," Vexa said at once, and to Ren: "Log: insistence of absence; memory boundary." To Obi-Wan: "Choice. You can keep your hand on the wand to confirm no contact, or I'll have Mij mirror the angle on a practice dummy first. Which do you choose?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Dummy," he whispered. "Then… my hand."

"Proceed," Vexa said.

Mij held the wand over the practice torso on the side cart, matching heights, angles, narration steady: "Subcostal… parasternal… apical." No touch. He turned the display so Obi-Wan could see the distance markers.

"Now you," Mij said softly. "I'm lifting the wand. Your hand on my wrist to set distance. I will not cross closer."

A long, uneven swallow. Obi-Wan reached, placed trembling fingers on Mij's wrist, and guided the height. "There," he ground out.

"Scanning," Mij said. A soft hum. "Left heart; regular rhythm, no effusion." A slow shift. "Right heart; regular rhythm." He angled lower, keeping the gap. "Subcostal… scar tissue consistent with recent unrelated rib knit. No active bleed. No fluid."

"Enough," Obi-Wan said, voice fraying. "Enough...there's nothing..."

"We're done," Vexa said immediately, then to Mij: "Any further imaging necessary now?"

"Negative," Mij replied. "Clinical is sufficient."

Obi-Wan's hands felt useless at his sides. He shifted them and then let them hang. He took a step forward. He licked his lips and made a face. "Metal."

“Side effect,” Mij acknowledged, quiet. “Expected. It’ll pass.”

His vitals held high. Vexa weighed the line. “Mij, state add-on.”

“Incremental anxiolytic, same route,” Mij said. “Half dose. Verbal intact.”

“Authorized,” Vexa said. “Announce. Ask. Act.”

“Second dose,” Mij narrated, showing the applicator, keeping it in Obi-Wan’s sightline. “Three, two, one.” Hiss. “Done. No more meds planned.”

Obi-Wan stared at a fixed point on the wall until the lines stopped swimming.

Mij waited a beat. “Requesting permission to palpate along the clavicle knit,” he said. “Glove off, bare hand only. Contact under three seconds. Left side. I will need to lift your shirt.”

Another uneven swallow. “Fine,” Obi-Wan said, wreckage and control braided together. “Three seconds.”

“Touching,” Mij said, and did exactly what he’d promised. “Off. Everything is looking good.”

Vexa’s tone softened by half a degree. “Outcome: de-escalated. No further restraint. Sedation minimal, consented post-authorization. Next steps: he walks or rides, his choice, back to his rooms.”

She waited for him to look at her; he didn’t. She didn’t force it.

“Obi-Wan,” she said instead, same metronome, same respect. “Do you want to walk with two at your flank, or ride the chair? Which do you choose?”

He worked his jaw. “Walk,” he said, hoarse. “And no one touches my arms.”

“Logged,” Vexa replied. “Two-meter flanks. Hands visible. We proceed at your pace.”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer. He pressed thumb to ring finger—once, twice—and stepped.

Jango stepped back from the entrance and waited until Obi-Wan cleared the threshold, two guards ghosting his flanks, hands visible, Vexa pacing the metronome at the front. Then he stepped fully into the room. The chair Obi-Wan had thrown lay canted on one leg; the tray Mij had saved from the floor was haphazardly set back on a shelf. The lights still hummed that thin note.

He set his helmet on the counter with a soft clunk. “Report.”

Mij didn't bother with preface. "Orthopaedic repairs hold. Hand knit intact. Clavicle alignment good. No edema. Subcostal scan shows scar consistent with recent rib knit, no effusion, no active bleed. Both hearts regular. Vitals spiked during escalation then returned to baseline after anxiolytic and de-escalation protocol."

Jango's jaw worked once. "Pain?"

"Present, managed. He overguards when startled, which will slow healing if we provoke it. Physiotherapy can begin again as per plan, tomorrow. Light range only."

Jango tipped his chin toward the door Obi-Wan had just used. "The panic."

Mij folded his arms; bare hands, gloves pocketed, the new habit he'd forced on himself. "The stab site. Any attention to it; verbal or physical, presses a boundary he is holding shut to function. You saw the denial script: 'there's nothing there.', he's dissociating. We can work the scan when necessary, but only with preview, distance control, and a pause word."

"Hold," Jango said.

"Exactly. He used it implicitly. Next time I'll cue it sooner."

Jango's gaze cut to the bed, its clean white blanket a mess. "Neuro?"

"Your presence raises his adrenal output," Mij said, flatly factual. "Your touch, applied chest-to-chest or sternum to upper abdomen, entrains respiration within eight seconds and drops catecholamines by thirty to fifty percent depending on initial spike."

Jango didn't hide the way his mouth tightened. "Is there a cost?"

"If we use it as a crutch, he won't build regulation that doesn't require you, making him compromised with your absence" Mij said. "This shouldn't be hard to manage; you've been careful to stagger contact so far."

Jango took that in. "Logged."

Mij nodded once, then added, "He's dissociating in moments. You'll see the stare; fixed point, long blink latency, speech drops to fragments. That's the edge. If we keep him predictable, he comes back faster. If we push, we'll get more red zones."

Jango exhaled, a thin, controlled thing. "Food? Sleep?"

"Mij said, "The food plan is going well; he's put on weight and he's getting the right nutrition for a Stewjonian. Sleep is fractured. Night watch reports frequent nightmares. We can try a metronome light bar or a breath ladder; tools he can use alone."

"Explain them," Jango said.

"The light bar is a thin holo-strip mounted on the wall or headboard," Mij said. "It sweeps left to right at a fixed cadence; he tracks it with his eyes and matches his breathing to the sweep. It anchors attention and, on a steady four-in/six-out, drops catecholamines without

drugs. It's dim, silent, voice-activated, and powers down once blink rate and respiration hit sleep."

"And the ladder?"

"A visual timer that steps him through set ratios; four-four, then four-six, up to four-eight—and back down," Mij said. "Longer exhale than inhale so he doesn't hyperventilate. It gives his hands something to do and lets him restart himself at three in the morning without staff. No touch. No Force techniques. Simple pacing."

"Install both," Jango said. "Training room stays on his schedule. Padded work only until you clear more." He paused, then added, softer, "I don't want him weak."

"Logged," Mij replied, tapping notes. "I'll send Kira a full list once we're finished."

Jango tapped the counter once with a knuckle. "Medication?"

"Minimal. Same intranasal on red-line only. Non-sedating analgesia titrated around physio. If he refuses PO, we can compound an ODT or go transdermal. Intranasal remains our acute plan."

"He'll resist," Jango said, tired. "I'm surprised Cody managed to keep him alive as long as he did; he's resistant to anything suggested for his wellbeing… But at this point the effects of not treating him outweigh the resistance."

Mij nodded. "His adjustment is going as predicted. This is par for the course. We'll brief him on options ahead of time—predictability keeps the fights small. Rectal is emergency-only."

Jango nodded. "Make sure he knows the plan in advance. But if you need to authorise, do."

"Logged," Mij said. He thought some more, considered, then chose bluntness. "He'll get angrier before he gets easier."

A beat passed. Jango nodded once in acceptance. Then he appraised Mij. "You were different today."

"I was told to behave," Mij said, echoing his earlier line, but there was a grain of something like apology under the clinical.

"So it had nothing to do with the show we put on for you yesterday?"

Mij looked away. "I don't know what I saw." He shook his head. "I don't understand how… Manda… I'm still trying to process it. We all are."

Jango nodded. "If you had any questions about my claim as Mand'alor, I hope they're dissuaded now."

Mij looked at Jango. "If anything, my questions have multiplied… not about your right to rule—about the Manda. What it is. Why did it choose you? Why Obi-Wan? If the Manda knows what we've been through… why a Jetii? Why that one?"

Jango smiled. “You’ll see in time,” he said, and turned to leave.

Jango picked up the chair Obi-Wan had thrown, set it square, then turned the monitor off with a thumb. “Send me your written protocol by end of cycle,” he said.

Mij inclined his head. “Understood.”

Jango palmed his helmet and paused at the door, voice low enough not to carry. “He claims ‘nothing happened.’ Treat that like a wound, not a lie.”

Mij’s answer was simple. “Logged.”

Chapter 25: A Competition

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys, so I'm sick with the flu and might have gotten a bit silly on cough mixture while writing this. If you guys want me to go and fix it into my normal seriousness then please let me know and when I'm feeling a little better I will edit it back to normal... lol!

They sat in the briefing room silently, waiting for their Mand'alor. The air felt tense, uncomfortable, but no one dared to comment or leave.

Jango didn't make them wait long. He arrived, took the chair beside Vexa, lifted his brows at the silence, and said, "Proceed."

"First order of business," Myles said, all business. "Our young Boba Fett. He's given a few names, but nothing connects any of them to the incident. Your kid picked people he knew we'd take seriously. He's been wasting our time, Mand'alor."

Jango frowned. "I thought our talk helped… clearly he learned how to bullshit from the best."

Cody coughed and fell silent.

"What's the plan, then? I won't have my son detained indefinitely," Jango went on, "but I also don't want him clinging to the belief that he can stab whoever he likes without getting clearance first."

Ventress smiled. "I didn't need clearance when I was his age, and I turned out well. Steady job, beautiful home, and a handsome husband who worships the ground I walk on," she added, looking at Jango. "He's aced obedience training; if there's a 'way', this is it."

Jango didn't smile. "Keep it professional," he said, cold.

Ventress shrugged. "Very well, Mand'alor," she said, inclining her head.

Myles didn't smile, but his eyes did. "For the record," he said blandly, "Husband Acquisition & Retention is outside my remit."

"Stay in your lane," Vexa murmured. "On record."

"Boba," Jango prompted, irritation thinly veiled.

"Consequence menu," Cody said, sliding a slate across. "Flight block suspended. Range privileges pulled. Escorted movement only. Daily instruction increased. All the usual… none

of which have worked so far."

"And an apology," Vexa added, crisp.

Jango lifted a finger. "That timing is mine."

"Logged," Vexa said.

Myles tapped his vambrace. "Also recommend Tasking as Deterrent: vent-route audits, carbon scoring removal. Boring jobs with interesting solvents and no glory."

"Make him scrape gum off the underside of the mess tables," Ventress said. "Builds character."

"Do it," Jango cut in. "Varik continues interviews. Boba is not detained indefinitely; he is heir to this empire. If he volunteers another list of fake co-conspirators, I'll assign him to a panel on creative writing." A beat. "Moderated by Vexa."

Cody definitely did not cough again.

"Second order," Jango said, and the room sobered. "The Runi'oyay'dinuir's scheduled learning."

"Exposure in the main classroom, at current amplitude, will redline him," Mij said. "He's dissociating and guarding hard. We can grade exposure in micro-doses, or—"

"Or we revert to the solo annex," Vexa said. "Which was the original plan."

Jango's mouth tilted. "I changed that last minute so he could see acceptance as it happened. Quinlan as social proof. It was a gamble." His voice thinned. "Given the incident, we need fewer variables."

Cody folded his arms. "If we move him to solo without care, he'll read it as isolation; punishment, not recovery."

"Then we call it what it is," Myles said. "Recovery curriculum. Annex pilot. Whatever sells that this is us trialling other options, without bringing up the incident directly."

Ventress twirled a stylus. "And we keep 'exposure therapy' out of staff vocab. Sounds like a spa package. 'Welcome to our Exposure Deluxe with hot stones and light restraints.'"

"Please stop talking," Mij said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Cody ticked through routes. "Security improves with annex. Fewer transits, fewer choke points, no shared corridors at bell change. Call it a forty-percent reduction in opportunities for stupidity."

"Medical improves as well," Mij said. "Predictability reduces spikes. He can learn the light bar and breath ladder and bring those skills into solo instruction without disrupting the others."

Ren slid into the flow. “Annex is staged. I can mirror the cohort syllabus beat-for-beat, push the same content to his slate, and log completions. I’ll adjust service doors so the route reads routine.”

“Social?” Jango asked, eyes on Ahsoka.

“Separate it,” Ahsoka said. “Household gallery only, so he doesn’t feel spied on. Thirty minutes with Quinlan once or twice a week. Obi-Wan chooses one more from a safe list—Plo, or me—for twenty. Predictable, consented, scripted.”

“Predictable and scripted,” Vexa echoed, almost approving. “Yes.”

“It will need careful observation,” Myles said. “Measure privacy in teaspoons. Door open. No surprise bodies appearing in thresholds.” He glanced at Ventress, cool. “I still don’t trust your ‘husband’.”

Ventress raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Neither do I.”

“How do we reintegrate?” Jango asked.

Mij counted on his fingers. “Seven consecutive days without a red event. Demonstrated use of ‘Hold’ in two distinct sessions. Orientation checks clear at wake and pre-lesson for five days. Nightmares stable or trending down. Physio attendance at ninety percent with no over-guarding.”

“Security gate,” Cody added. “Zero incident reports in household during the window. Transit drills with stand-ins before we put the real thing in motion.”

Myles flicked a note to himself. “Comms: ‘Routine adjustment to evaluation block.’ Any staff chatter triggers increased off-premises surveillance, temporary loss of corridor badge access, and a close personal introduction to my list of interesting solvents.”

Jango’s jaw worked once. “Agreed.”

“Decision,” Vexa said, taking it down. “Two-week annex trial. Education solo. Social separate, household only. Weekly Quinlan: thirty. One additional visitor by Obi-Wan’s choice from the approved list: twenty. Written previews for every block. Light bar and breath-ladder practice. No unscheduled visitors. Weekly review; fourteen-day gate for hybrid re-entry if thresholds are met.”

“Copy,” Cody said.

“Logged,” Ren said.

“I’ll publish the thresholds by end of cycle,” Mij added.

“I’ll brief Quinlan,” Ahsoka said. “Then ask Obi-Wan who else he wants.”

Myles stood, smoothing his jacket. “And I’ll go sit on the gossip like a fat cat on a datapad.”

Ventress rose too, stretching like a knife. “I’m starting a jar for every time someone says ‘exposure therapy.’ Winner gets… not to be exposed to therapy.”

“Meeting adjourned,” Jango said, collecting his helmet. “Do your jobs.”

They broke in efficient lines. On the way out, Cody leaned toward Myles, quiet.

“Interesting solvents?”

Myles didn’t look up. “You have no idea.”

Jango stormed into his office where Myles sat waiting, looking far too relaxed.

“Is your friendship with Ventress becoming a problem?” Jango asked, folding his arms.

Myles raised his brows. “No.”

“Don’t do that,” Jango snapped.

“Do what?” Myles asked, all innocence.

“You know what; act like you weren’t just flirting with the biggest flirt in the galaxy. You’re making my team meetings unprofessional.”

Myles snorted. “Jealous, Jango? Besides, you started it.”

Jango snarled, crossed the room, and dropped into his chair. Myles let it roll off.

“What am I head of?” Myles asked.

Jango gave him a look that would scatter a strill pack. “Intelligence.”

“Exactly. And where would it hurt you most to have a traitor?”

Jango exhaled, conceding the point. “So you want them acting chummy and disrespectful in front of me?”

“I want them comfortable. Unguarded. If anyone’s hiding something, they’re likelier to slip when they’re relaxed. Anxiety clamps everyone up. Ventress and I are doing you a favour. People perform for rank. They talk to people. The flirt is theatre; the objective is chatter. Vexa says ‘On record,’ I shut it off.”

Jango nodded once.

Myles’s mouth tilted. “I know it irritates you, Mand’alor. If you want, you can take it out on me tonight.”

Jango arched a brow. “I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I can get as good as I give,” Myles said. “You should know.”

“You risk turning this into a competition,” Jango said, amused despite himself.

Myles leaned forward. “That’s the idea.”

Obi-Wan was oddly relieved when he was told he’d be studying alone for now. More than relieved, if he was honest. The promise of time (as alone as he ever was now) with Quinlan helped; he’d chosen Plo as his second point of contact because he wasn’t ready to face Ahsoka yet. He, the once-great general, was afraid of speaking to his own grand-Padawan.

If Qui-Gon could see—

If Qui-Gon…

He shook his head. Lately, whenever he thought of his Master, he felt as if he were forgetting something important. He pushed it away as Vexa led him down a household corridor to a door he’d never been shown, never permitted to enter.

She keyed it and ushered him, and two guards with hands visible, into a surprisingly large classroom. It had been built for one student and one teacher, but not a single detail had been missed.

Vexa handed him a single page. “Preview: today’s lesson topics, sources, and tools. ‘Hold’ is honored in this room. Door stays open.”

She gestured to the chair; there were no restraints. “As you will be learning alone, they’re unnecessary,” she said. “Restraints were only ever engaged due to the number of warriors requiring supervision in one room.”

Obi-Wan sat. The seat was comfortable; the desk broad for a classroom. His slate waited, of course, but so did a neat stack of flimsi, several writing tools, and a holoprojector sized for a single viewer.

His instructor stepped in: a man in full, well-polished beskar’gam. “I have been chosen by the Armorer to oversee your education,” he said. “At times, your previous teachers will join us, but they have many others to attend. You may call me ba’jur’alor. I will call you ‘Obi-Wan’ or ‘Runi’oyay’dinuir.’”

Obi-Wan inclined his head. “Very well,” he said, quiet.

A gloved hand lifted, palm out, asking for more.

“Very well… ba’jur’alor,” Obi-Wan amended, and if he had felt like a youngling on his first day at the shared classroom, it was that feeling on stilts now.

“Thank you. I will speak to you with respect; like Vexa, I expect the same in return. Within that, you may ask what you like.”

Obi-Wan must have let something slip on his face, because the ba’jur’alor’s helmet tilted a fraction, then he tapped his vambrace. The screen behind him lit: Kamino, white corridors, rain, rows of boys with the same face.

“Today’s unit: Kamino; procurement, personhood, and law,” he said. “We begin with the clones and the question of slavery.”

Obi-Wan’s stomach turned. “Hold,” he said.

The ba’jur’alor paused the holos at once. “Would you like to use one of your techniques, or breathe for thirty seconds and continue?”

Obi-Wan swallowed. The images were frozen, but still there; children who had grown up to… men he’d watched die. He had known it was wrong. And what was the alternative? He pressed thumb to ring finger twice.

“Continue,” he said, voice unsteady. A beat. “Ba’jur’alor.”

Chapter 26: War Crimes

Chapter Notes

> Yay! This fic has hit 20,000 hits! so excited about it too! Enjoy the chapter and also... thanks everyone who gives me advice and suggestions, or point out what might need some work as it really helps me! at the very least it gets me to stop and think about the story from another angle!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ba'jur'alor pulled a chair in front of him rather than sitting behind the desk. He'd just finished laying out the childhoods lost under Jedi sanction; Kamino, numbers in place of names. Slavery. Death… or, as his instructor named it, war crimes.

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on the desk. "The Jedi didn't know about the clones," he said, low. "They didn't know what was happening. No one on the Council would have gone along with it."

The visor stayed quiet for a long beat. "And when they did know?" the ba'jur'alor asked at last. "What did they do then?" A beat. "What did you do?"

Obi-Wan looked up, sharp. "What would you have done differently? Let the Republic fall? Let civilians suffer when we could stop it? If it were your family on the line—what would you have done?"

"Not use slaves as cannon fodder," the armoured man said, even. "At the very least, not stand by while 'defective' clones were decommissioned to save credits."

"We… I didn't know about that." The words tasted like metal. "We weren't told every detail of the cloning operation."

"Did you ask?"

Obi-Wan's thumb found ring finger; once, twice. "I did my best for my men," he said. "I put myself at risk to keep them safe. It wasn't perfect, but we did the best with the knowledge we had."

The ba'jur'alor inclined his helmet. "What would you ask them now?" he said, softer. "There are three in this household. Your task is to interview each. Ask for their stories, the good and the bad. Write a report on each. You may take your time and honour 'Hold.' One report per standard week. Are we understood?"

"Yes, ba'jur'alor," Obi-Wan said.

“Very well. You may schedule the first interview within forty-eight hours… or we can begin with Commander Cody now for five minutes only. Your choice.”

A long, uneven swallow. “Now,” Obi-Wan said, because delaying would feel like running.

“Logged.” The ba’jur’alor stood, keyed the door, and vacated the chair.

Cody entered and sat opposite, hands visible on his knees, posture open. The vid still hung frozen on the wall: small bodies, too many numbers, a corridor that led nowhere. The room tilted.

“Hold,” Obi-Wan said, the word scraping out before anything else. He felt like a coward for saying it. He said it anyway.

Cody exhaled once, slow. He didn’t move closer. “Name,” he said gently.

“Obi-Wan.”

“Place.”

“Sundari.”

“Direct.”

Obi-Wan fixed on a point by Cody’s pauldron. “Five minutes. Then stop.”

“Logged,” Cody said. He let another breath pass. “First thing you should know: we forgave you. All of us. You were the best of them.”

Obi-Wan knew what he meant by them and wouldn’t say the word. In this place it felt like a slur. He pressed thumb to ring finger; once, twice, and made himself meet Cody’s eyes.

“I’m still one of them, Cody,” Obi-Wan said. “I’m still Jedi.”

He had never seen Cody look at him like that. It was chilling how much of Jango he carried in that moment; steady, unblinking, iron under velvet.

“You were never meant to be one of them,” Cody said, even. “They took you as a child and called it Code. We call it theft. If the Mand’alor had found you first—”

“Hold,” Obi-Wan snapped, too loud. “You believe all this ‘Runi’oyay’dinuir’ bantha fodder?” He stared, saw the quiet in Cody’s eyes, and knew the answer was yes. “So that’s why you betrayed me.”

Cody didn’t flinch. He let a breath out slow, hands still where Obi-Wan could see them. “Name.”

“Obi-Wan.”

“Place.”

“Sundari.”

“Direct.”

Obi-Wan’s thumb tapped ring finger; once, twice. “Say your piece,” he ground out. “Then stop.”

“Logged,” Cody said softly. “I executed an order that brought you in alive. I won’t pretend it didn’t feel like a break in my bones. But I won’t call it betrayal.” A beat. “I chose my people. And I chose the option that kept you breathing.”

Obi-Wan’s mouth twisted. “And all this-” he flicked two fingers toward the frozen vid on the wall, the corridors that ended in numbers “-is the justification.”

“It’s the reckoning,” Cody said. “What the Jedi didn’t know. What they knew and couldn’t bear to look at. What we lived.” He didn’t push forward; he stayed exactly where he was. “You asked what I’d tell you. That’s one piece. There are others. Five minutes, you said. I’ll stop when you say.”

Obi-Wan looked away. “It doesn’t matter what I say,” he murmured, sad and certain. “It matters what you believe. It matters that I can’t tell you what I really think without risking being held down and drugged.”

“Name,” Cody began again.

“No.” The word cut. “Enough of that. It doesn’t help anyone. It’s a tool to push me back onto your rails. No - hold.”

The guards shifted a half-step, ready.

Cody lifted a hand without looking at them, and they eased. “You’re not ready for this interview,” he said, serious. “Start with Waxer or Boil. You won’t like it more, but at least you blame them less than I.”

He rose. “I’m disappointed, Runi’oyay’dinuir,” he added, not unkind. “I never saw you as a coward.”

Obi-Wan lurched to his feet, heat flaring. “Kriff you, Cody,” he snarled. “Was it brave when you took my lightsaber from my belt like a friend? If you had been honest with me, we both know how that would have played out. Admit it: you were afraid.”

Cody didn’t turn. “Not of you, Runi’oyay’dinuir.” He paused. “You carried us through that war. You’re a natural nurturer; did it on instinct. In some ways, you were our mother, the way Jango was our father.” He stepped through the door and was gone. Obi-Wan stared after him, wondering if had fallen into some sort of fever dream.

Obi-Wan didn’t follow. He couldn’t. He didn’t even know what he would do if he did. He knew, with terrible certainty, what would be done to him.

The worst part however, was knowing Cody wasn't entirely wrong about him being a coward… and knowing Cody knew it, too.

They took Observation Two. A one-way unbreakable pane. Four chairs. A table, and a holo-projector. They could see Obi-Wan still in the classroom, reviewing the day's lesson, going over files he'd been given to read, unpleasant content, but it was necessary for his integration, and acceptance.

Vexa brought the clip up without preface: Obi-Wan at the annex desk, the ba'jur'alor in front of him, not behind the instructor's table. They watched the moment he said it; "*I'm still one of them, Cody. I'm still Jedi."*

Jango didn't sit. He stood with arms folded at the head of the table and looked down on the other three "Unpack it."

Verin Bralor, the new instructor bowed his head at his Mand'alor's request, and counted on gloved fingers. "He's defending along three rails. One: ignorance…'we didn't know.' Two: necessity… 'Republic first.' Three: virtue… 'I did my best for my men.' Identity sits under all three. If we strike the jetii label first, we redline him. If we strike the rails, the label loses scaffolding."

"Translation," Cody said, arms folded but loose. "Don't try to pry 'Jedi' off him with a blade. Take the screws out of the mount."

"Correct," Verin said.

Jango's jaw worked once. "I don't need him to confess sins of the Order. I need him functional and obedient. He clings to the label, and it limits this, he *cannot* outrank my orders and nor can his beliefs."

Verin nodded, eyes still on the freeze-frame. "Then we go behaviour-first, language-second, belief-last. He can keep his private liturgy. What he cannot do is use it to justify non-compliance or moral exemption."

"Plan," Jango said.

Verin shifted to the console. "Four lines of effort."

He raised one finger. "number one: Mapping. We run a values audit. He lists ten Jedi virtues he claims. We mirror them to household equivalents. *Compassion is aliit care protocols. Duty is chain of command.* We force the overlap so 'obedience to Jango' doesn't feel like treason to his story about himself."

Vexa ticked a note. "Logged. Deliver as worksheet, not debate. Debate escalates; worksheets ground."

Second finger. “number two: Witness first. Before we touch doctrine, as his current assignment, he interviews three; Waxer, Boil, Cody…on *their* experience. He writes summaries and then strongest case against the Order as the witness would put it, no rebuttal. Only after he can state the harm in clean lines does he earn a response paper.”

Cody’s mouth tipped. “He’ll hate it. But he’ll do it, he’s used to arguing two sides in a negotiation.”

Third finger. “number three: Asymmetry drills. He must concede one concrete failure per lesson before he’s allowed a defence. Not a blanket ‘we did our best’… a specific. *I knew X. I did Y. Here is the cost of Y to Z.* One concession unlocks one defence. Behaviourally, this breaks the all-or-nothing reflex.”

“Make it visible,” Vexa said. “Tally on display in the annex classroom.”

Fourth finger. “number four: Language shaping. No bans. We don’t forbid ‘Jedi.’ We move it to domain and past tense in formal contexts: *‘When I was Jedi, we were taught…’* or *‘In Jedi doctrine…’* If he reverts to present-tense identity, I reframe and continue without reaction; I failed in that today, I won’t again…” he paused and bowed to Jango, who nodded back “When he uses household titles correctly; ba’jur’alor, Runi’oyay’dinuir, Mand’alor, we reinforce with clean, immediate praise or small tier reward.”

Jango glanced at Vexa. “Consequence ladder if he proselytizes?”

“Simple,” Vexa said. “First time: redirect and continue. Second: five-minute pause with breath ladder. Third: end block early, he spends the rest of his study time in the quiet room decompressing.”

“Quinlan?” Cody asked. “He can undo us in ten minutes if we don’t give him rails.”

“Quinlan gets rails,” Vexa said. “Ventress can present them; he answers only preapproved questions involving the past or the jedi. If either of them attempts covert messaging, we end the session early. Second offense, we pull a number of visits depending on severity. Quinlan models the same language rules: domain, not essence. He says ‘When we were Jedi’ in front of Obi-Wan until it becomes natural.”

Jango watched the feed for another heartbeat, the way Obi-Wan’s thumb found ring finger, once, twice.

“I am still concerned with the attempt to influence him after the stabbing when the suppressor was removed. I would like such connections weakened before we have another situation that requires its removal again.” Jango said looking out over Obi-Wan through the pane, sitting at his desk, hunched over.

“Logged,” Vexa said. “Clinical caution in regards to past jedi connections: It’s been recommended we not attack attachment to Qui-Gon head-on. That’s load-bearing. We can use it indirectly; ask what Qui-Gon would want for a soldier under his command. But if we try to knock the pillar, we will get a red event.”

Jango set his helmet on the table, careful as a blade. “I don’t care if he is crying out for his old master in his sleep, I care if Qui-Gon can still influence his choices, I care that when I say *walk,* he walks, and when I say *stop,* he stops.”

Verin inclined his helmet. “In time, he will. It is our job to reshape his sense of normal, and he will discover, slowly, that he can do the work without the turmoil. One day he’ll notice he’s been living in a different house.”

Cody huffed something like a laugh. “Rebranding.”

“Reassignment,” Vexa corrected. “We reassign loyalties. We do not erase.”

“Plan approved.” Jango said eyes still firmly on Obi-Wan.

“Copy,” Cody said.

“Logged,” Verin said.

Jango palmed his helmet and nodded to the room. “Good. The time of the jedi is gone. What he was, he will never be again.”

When Bail first told her there was a bloc of senators preparing to resist the new Mandalorian Empire, she hadn’t understood the scope; or how far they were willing to go.

Saw Gerrera was not someone she had ever planned to work alongside. But needs must; and she needed help getting Anakin back. Saw understood the danger of letting this Empire claim every Force-sensitive in the galaxy. Some were still running, yes—but they were being hunted to exhaustion and taken alive. Like Anakin. New slaves to the Empire.

Padme had heard of three already, run to ground and dragged in breathing. If they could bring in Anakin, who was the strongest of the Jedi, then no Jedi stood a chance. The thought hollowed her.

The twins were growing daily, and Anakin wasn’t here to see the firsts begin to pile up. Leia had started pushing up as if to crawl, a determined little darling. Her brother, by contrast, had discovered rolling; he would tumble across the rug again and again to reach a toy, stubborn about wanting it, stubborn about not pushing with his arms. He made her laugh; like his father.

Not today. Today even they couldn’t make her smile. She looked at them and had to turn away. She had to hide her tears, had to school her breathing, so the fear wouldn’t reach them, wouldn’t settle in their minds.

She left the nursery, nodding to Breha to take over. She needed a walk. She needed to stop thinking about what she was losing and focus on what she still had… hope, a chance still for

the future they'd dreamed of.

She had been so angry with Anakin. To be fair, he tended to make that easy. But she wished they had parted on better terms. Maybe then this wouldn't feel… like she'd betrayed him somehow.

She found Bail in the conference room. He looked up when she entered, face drawn and pale. The healthy curve of his cheeks was giving way to gauntness. He sighed and shook his head.

"I have to go with Saw," she said, firm. "Promise me you'll look after the twins."

"You're not thinking straight," he said, standing. "Aligning yourself with someone who would happily blow up fifty civilians to get one Mandalorian… it's not worth it."

"I have to try."

"You would abandon your children to save someone who already betrayed us - betrayed everything he said he stood for!" His voice roughened. "He would have handed the Republic to the Sith, for Maker's sake. The Sith… they—"

"You don't need to lecture me about the Sith," she cut in. "I know what they are capable of. I've seen their manipulations. Anakin hasn't fallen completely; he was coming back to me, to us. You just have to help me get him back. I won't need Saw if you'll help me."

He shook his head again. "I can't risk the manpower it would take to strike the capital. I can't afford to expose us this early. I can't afford the hunt he would bring to our doors. We've already risked enough for him." He looked down, a crease cutting his brow. "I wish I could tell you something different. But I am responsible for millions. I can't risk their safety for one man. I won't."

"Then you leave me no choice."

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions about this fic, that I can not answer in comments (due to not wanting to spoil anything for others) Then you can send me a message on Tumblr... my name there is 'obi-wan-fun'.

Chapter 27: A Funeral Procession

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bail was taken from his ship by way of a palace shuttle; it was ushered ahead of the queue at the security checkpoint, which would have been nice, but for the vailed threats he received by checkpoint staff. Everyone, including the palace's contingent had to disembark and be checked before re-boarding and continuing into the city proper.

The city had become a political district; the centralized machinery once housed on Coruscant was being rebuilt here under the Empire's banner. Trade was down; unsurprising when every route in or out of Sundari was tightly controlled. Even so the economy ticked upward as well-paid civil servants arrived to take their relocated posts. He'd heard the poor were moving out, chasing work in nearby cities; relocations were subsidized heavily enough that few complained.

The landing pad itself was a statement: flanked by anti-air emplacements, banners with the new crest, a Mythosaur skull, snapping in the recirculated wind, and a neat row of sharpshooters visible on the opposite gantry, their visors black and depthless. The air smelled of solvent, hot metal, and the dry ozone of shield projectors.

A reception detail fell in with clockwork precision. The Mandalorian in charge introduced himself as Myles; a massive man with a pleasant voice, predator's stillness, and fell into step at Bail's shoulder.

"Welcome to Sundari, Senator," he said. "If you'd be so kind, stay on the blue tiles. Those are the only approved routes for senators. There's a shoot-first, ask-later policy elsewhere; we'd hate a mix-up."

They went inside. Door seals hissed behind them with a hydraulic finality that prickled the skin at the back of his neck. Each threshold was another demonstration: scanners checking for weapons he didn't have; a polite chime as his ID pinged; a faint magnetic thunk as locks seated. Boots struck stone in a single cadence, two guards ahead, four behind, which Bail noted was most probably rehearsed to unsettle.

Myles led him through a sequence of corridors designed to disorient. Sightlines curved away; windows, when they appeared, offered only controlled vistas: a courtyard of raked stone, a banner hall, a slice of sky occluded by latticework and patrol drones. Cameras tracked without blinking. Helmets turned as one when he passed, T-visors reflecting him back at himself, small and distorted.

"Always remain with your escort," Myles added mildly as they took a broad stair, no lift here, only echoing steps and the soft rasp of fabric. "Maintenance cycles can… surprise visitors. Airflow cuts, lights dim, doors seal. Dreadful for morale."

Bail felt about as safe as a bantha in a strill pack. Still, this was not his first flight lesson. If the Mand'alor meant to harm him, he'd have been arrested on arrival, or any moment prior. This was theatre, and like all good theatre, it had a purpose; one Bail understood.

They passed under a gallery of war reliefs carved in stone: warriors rendered larger than life, a stylized storm of blades, blasters and banners. Somewhere beyond the walls a low hum rose and fell, the steady respiration of the palace itself: pumps, generators, the heartbeat of a machine that never slept.

At last he was shown to well-guarded guest rooms. His luggage had already been delivered. So: the scenic route.

The suite was tasteful and impersonal. The single viewport looked inward on a manicured light-well where no one lingered more than a minute. When he tested the sill, he felt the bite of a micro-field; the latch showed a polite red on the panel. The door, when it closed, seated with that same soft magnetic kiss. Even the tea service felt curated; hot, perfectly timed, placed just so that his dominant hand found it with ease, as if to say: we know your schedule and we know you.

He was slated to dine with other envoys that evening. In the morning, he would be brought before the Mand'alor.

Bail poured the tea and watched the steam curl in the conditioned air. Somewhere down the hall, boots clicked in unison, passed, and faded. He set the cup down without drinking. The room was comfortable. The message was not.

Jango was at dinner. Obi-Wan had known he would be. But feeling Jango's eyes on him while he ate was like being stared down by a rancor whilst knowing it planned to devour you, and still lifting your cup of tea with what dignity you could muster.

The table was quiet until the rancor decided it was too peaceful.

"How are your interviews going, Obi-Wan?" Jango asked, casual.

Obi-Wan refused to look at him. "I think you know the answer to that." He kept eating.

"I believe you're set to interview Waxer tomorrow?"

"I believe any answer I give right now would be superfluous."

He reached for seasoning and knocked his water, when had be become so clutzy? A staff member arrived quickly, replacing the glass; towels mopped the spill as it crept across the table. His sleeve and lap were left damp.

Eyes slid to the Mand'alor. Normally Vexa would ask his name, determine he was steady, and usher him to change. Jango waved it off. "I'll take care of it after dinner."

"No need," Obi-Wan said. "I can sort it now." He stood.

"No, Obi-Wan." Jango gestured to the chair, tone still pleasant. "Please finish your dinner. As I said, I'll help you after."

He sat. He chose to… because the alternative was being chased down and dragged back, restrained or drugged or both. Gravity had teeth. In the sitting he understood, suddenly and with terrible clarity, that he was losing. Losing the argument, losing the war, losing himself.

He shut his eyes, tried to steady his breathing, reached for the Force on reflex - whiplash and silence. Alone.

"Name," Jango asked, gentle.

Air went in; it didn't seem to land. Obi-Wan bent forward. He needed to pull himself together before Jango used it as an excuse to touch him again… though they had a sitting-room visit scheduled after dinner. Touch seemed inevitable.

He tried counting in his head, he might have managed to calm himself. But a hand settled at the nape of his neck, warm and inexorable, and enforced calm poured through him. His lungs loosened. Breath matched cadence. Jango's mouth was near his ear. "Good. You're okay. I've got you."

He was calm. And he wept.

Jango kept talking as he cried, low assurances that smoothed muscle by muscle. A broad palm rubbed slow circles between his shoulders.

"Please," Obi-Wan whispered through the quiet. "Please."

"That's enough dinner for tonight," Jango murmured. "Let's get you changed."

Still holding the nape, Jango reached for Obi-Wan's forearm to guide him up. Obi-Wan didn't rise. He'd just sat. "Please," he tried again. 'Leave me alone' was left unsaid.

Another set of fingers took his other arm and helped him to his feet. Jango told him everything was fine. More of the same meaningless platitudes.

Obi-Wan let himself be steered, damp fabric cold against his skin.

Nothing would ever be fine again. He wasn't going to be okay. There was no coming back from this. No light at the end of a hall leading him home. That light was behind him now, ahead was only darkness. He knew it, but with Jango's hand ever present he felt at peace about it at least.

Two guards ghosted them back to Obi-Wan's rooms. Obi-Wan stood, still and compliant between the guards, while Jango busied himself at the wardrobe, flipping hangers, precise.

He drew out a blue tunic and held it up, measuring the hue against Obi-Wan's face; nodded to himself.

"You should wear blue more often," Jango said. "It suits you." He placed it in Obi-Wan's hands.

They were still shaking. Jango noticed and set his palm over Obi-Wan's, sending more calm until the tremor faded.

"We'll step outside while you change," Jango said to Obi-Wan's surprise. "When you're finished, I have a surprise for you."

The door slid shut behind them, Jango last out. Obi-Wan stared at the panel a moment, hollow. Then he undressed and changed on automatic. His smalls were damp; he swapped those, found clean leggings. The act of changing; fabric over skin, the simple sequence of sleeves and seams offered the smallest scrap of ground.

He clung to it. When he finished, he paused, looking at the closed door, and felt a strange urge to hide. He didn't. He froze. He couldn't stop whatever Jango had planned. Right here, now, in this room… the Jedi had died.

He was still standing there when the door chimed and Jango came back in.

"cyar'ika?" he asked softly, stepping closer.

"Hold," Obi-Wan said, needing a moment.

Jango took another step and looked like he might keep coming but then stopped after all, his eyes running over Obi-Wan in appreciation.

Obi-Wan looked at him properly for the first time that night. "I never stood a chance. You… do you know what you're doing to me?"

Jango sighed. "I know it's hard right now, my Runi'oyay'dinuir. But it will get easier with time. There is so much good still to come; we can make a life. But first you need to accept it." He moved closer, cataloguing Obi-Wan's face, "and accept who you are."

Obi-Wan shook his head almost imperceptibly. "You know I can't."

Jango's eyes widened a fraction before hardening. "You will, either way, Runi'oyay'dinuir. You are mine. We are soulbound – we have all the time in the Galaxy."

Obi-Wan shook his head without intending to.

"Then what is this, Obi-Wan?" Jango stepped forward. Obi-Wan backed up, and was followed. Déjà vu.

There was a wall behind him. Jango would win. He could fight and be taken down or run to a door that would not open. He froze and let Jango's palm find bare skin. Warmth spread. Jango didn't hold back. Obi-Wan felt dazed and tipped forward into Jango's arms.

“This,” Jango said into his hair, “is the bond. It’s you and me. It’s sacred. It’s power. It’s mine.”

Obi-Wan drifted in the feeling until Jango lifted his hand from his bare forearm. He righted himself and stepped back.

“What are you going to do with me tonight?” he asked, weakly.

“We’re going on an outing,” Jango said simply.

Obi-Wan must have done a poor job at hiding his surprise, because Jango smiled; warm, indulgent. “I think you’ll enjoy it.”

Obi-Wan nodded, unsure.

“Come,” Jango said, and led him from the room into the entrance hall, where a small detachment of Cody’s men waited.

“We have the soft restraints if we need them,” Jango said, unbothered. “But I’d hoped you’d make it easier on yourself tonight.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Walk.”

“Logged,” Jango said, pleased that Obi-Wan had understood his options.

Even so, four guards closed around him; four more shadowed them a few meters back. Jango wasn’t taking chances. Obi-Wan wondered if the full cordon was for him alone. With the Force suppressed, it didn’t take many Mandalorians to hold him; either this was theatre; or they were worried he had allies after all.

They cleared the household’s layered security and turned a direction he’d never taken. Usually, he left the security of the household only for medical. Tonight, corridors opened into another wing of the palace.

Staff he’d never seen before moved aside at their approach; different uniforms than the household crew, bowing their heads to Jango, stealing curious looks at Obi-Wan. He kept his eyes ahead, thumb to ring finger; once, twice, breath even, step steady. Hands stayed visible on either side of him. The procession’s boots were in time on the hard tiled floor. The air smelled colder here, cleaner, like metal scrubbed with citrus.

He was being shown something. Or he was being shown off. Either way, he walked.

They took several flights of sweeping stairs, so different from the lifts near his household. More people here; more heads dipped to Jango. It made Obi-Wan want to scream. It made him want to shake them.

The curious looks followed. Further on, where more wore armour, recognition began to ripple back. He had been famous once. A general. It felt like a lifetime ago, though it had been only a couple months at most.

Worse were the faces he recognised from visits to Satine. Her nephew, now in another clan's colours, caught his eye. Obi-Wan's breath snagged. "Hold," he whispered, too soft to carry.

He didn't look up after that, he paused at one point, Jango did his version of helping him along. When the more populated halls were behind them it was a relief.

They moved deeper, further down into the depths of the place. The air cooled further; even on a main thoroughfare it felt thinner, older. At last, they reached an elaborate entranceway: stone carved with warriors in motion.

Obi-Wan barely saw it. He was thinking of the boy; how much more he looked like Satine now. Her eyes. Her nose. Fragments of her, living on.

The doors swung wide and Jango ushered him through, leaving the guards outside. They shut with a hollow thud. He wished they'd come in with them, being alone with Jango made him feel as though he needed to be running, or fighting… both even.

A cavern opened before them, vast and ribbed with ancient rock. Pools stretched out, steaming, their vapour curling upward. Overhead, the cave roof glittered with a scatter of cold blue lights.

"Bioluminescence," Jango said; as if Obi-Wan didn't know.

Obi-Wan bit back a retort. "Oh."

"The pools are thermally fed. Mineral-rich." Earnest, almost. A strange thought flickered: did Jango think this was a date?

"I see," Obi-Wan said, pleasantly as he could manage, sweeping his gaze over the broad chamber, counting basins, searching for any other door.

Fingers caught his chin and turned his face back. Not harsh, just inarguable.

"There's no exit here but me." Steel in the voice, dark in the eyes. "Do you really think I'd bring you anywhere you could slip a net?" He leaned in, soft as a knife. "You should know by now; I don't take chances."

He didn't wait for a reply. He strode to the nearest pool, crouched, and dipped two fingers. "Hm." He moved to the next, testing again, blue light skimming across beskar as if the cave approved. "They're different temperatures," he went on, as though he hadn't just pinned Obi-Wan to the moment. "You check before you get in; make sure it suits you. Different species, different heat."

He paused at a broad basin where natural benches stepped down into water that breathed steam. "Here." He straightened. "This should be perfect." He began unbuttoning his shirt.

Threat rolled over Obi-Wan's skin on a delay. He stepped back.

Jango saw and lifted a brow, unbothered. "I thought you didn't want restraints." Another button slid free. "No need to make something out of nothing."

“I… don’t feel like a swim.”

A small frown. The cavern swallowed the sound. “I’m trying to do something nice for you,” Jango said, accusing without heat, like a teacher noting a missed assignment. “You will join me.”

He undid the rest of the buttons before looking up again. “Do you want me to turn around while you undress?”

Obi-Wan swallowed and nodded. Jango looked faintly amused but turned, continuing to disrobe with casual confidence. His back and shoulders rippled with strength and it felt disconcerting. Had he truly once flirted with this man? Had he entertained a vague want? Yes. How foolish he’d once been.

Obi-Wan’s hands shook as he undressed, keeping his eyes on Jango. He left his clothes where they fell and slipped into the water. Heat tingled along his skin - hot, but not punishing. He chose a corner seat where Jango couldn’t sit beside him.

Jango was obviously proud of his body, and Obi-Wan got a full-frontal view. When Jango saw that Obi-Wan had seen, he grinned, and his penis twitched. He lifted his eye brows at Obi-Wan, challenging him to say something. But Obi-Wan’s mind had already moved on.

Jango Fett was not base human, and Obi-Wan would have been curious about Jango’s parentage, he could see he was clearly… a fascinating mix. But he pushed the thought away, more concerned than curious.

Jango stepped in without hesitation and took the bench opposite, the pool lapping at his chest. He wore his body the way he wore command: unashamed, assured, aware of every reaction in the room.

“I thought a more relaxing setting might suit our next conversation,” he said, as if this were a kindness.

Obi-Wan watched him through the curl of steam, unsure if silence would be counted against him.

“I don’t believe I’ve told you,” Jango continued, “but I have a team researching the bond, researching you, and everything that connects those things.”

Not a surprise. The man was obsessed.

“As part of that, I’ve granted them full access to the Jedi Archives, including your medical files.”

He paused, leaving the violation on the surface between them like oil. Waiting, perhaps, for protest. Obi-Wan looked down instead; the water had a faint pearly cast in the bioluminescent glow… beautiful, cold. He steadied his breathing and said nothing.

“It’s been brought to our attention that large sections are redacted.” Obi-Wan could feel Jango watching his face, reading for any tell. Obi-Wan was quietly pleased he knew nothing about

it.

“Care to guess what was in those files, Runi’oyay’dinuir?”

“I have no idea,” Obi-Wan said, with a shrug.

Jango hummed. Obi-Wan steeled himself and looked up into the dark of Jango’s eyes. They held there a long beat. Then Jango seemed satisfied; he leaned back and closed his eyes. “Okay, cyar’ika. I believe you.”

Obi-Wan had no words for that. He wasn’t going to thank the man for believing him… though the impulse startled him. Better to keep Jango… not happy, per se, but not irritated. Survival ran through that narrow channel.

“We also looked at your transcripts from your early education in the temple,” Jango continued, still relaxed.

Obi-Wan frowned, trying to work out where this was going.

“I noted that you got routine base-human sex education.” When Obi-Wan didn’t comment, he added, “Is that correct?”

Obi-Wan was too busy trying to understand the line of questioning; he must have taken too long, because Jango sat back up and looked at him, waiting.

“I… I suppose so,” he said, shaking his head in confusion. “Does it matter?”

Jango looked at him intently for a moment. “You are aware that you are not base-human?”

Obi-Wan did a double take, “I’m sorry” trying to find the words without sounding like he was being overly patient with a child “about any confusion, but I *am* base-human.”

Jango snorted but didn’t look amused. “We wondered if they kept it from you. Liars and thieves.” He muted angrily.

An old version of Obi-Wan sprang to life in his mind - *sounds like your kind of people,* he might have said - but he kept that voice quiet. Besides, he still had no idea what Jango was on about.

Jango let himself fall silent and consider how to frame his next sentences. When he spoke again, it was simple, iron under velvet.

“There’s something I have to explain to you. You won’t like it. It concerns Stewjon.” A beat. “Say ‘Hold’ if you need to and we can pause.”

Obi-Wan didn’t look up.

“There are scan packages from this week alone,” Jango went on, unhurried. “Two hearts.” He held up two fingers above the water. “A dual adrenal architecture. Thermal tolerance ten degrees beyond human comfort. And”, his hand drifted, the barest gesture toward Obi-Wan’s

nape… “a paired modulation node at C3–C4 that allows external entrainment.” He met Obi-Wan’s eyes. “That isn’t human.”

“A congenital anomaly,” Obi-Wan said. The words felt thin in his mouth. “Plural.” He said, then realised how that sounded, “hold”.

Jango stood and moved closer. So that he was standing a meter out from Obi-Wan. The waters were at his hips, not deep enough to hide anything if Obi-Wan looked at the wrong place.

“The node at your neck is why a hand there settles you. Base-human don’t present that cluster. I’ve been combining it with our bond since I found out, it works well.” His voice softened to something dangerously close to fond. “You think it’s weakness. It isn’t. It’s design.”

Dinner went as well as dinners with politicians ever did—an evening of smiling through a swamp of silver-tongued dragonsnakes. Bail had known there was an ulterior motive; it announced itself quickly enough. They sounded him out with lacquered delicacy, angling questions toward his friendships with former Jedi. “War criminals,” one envoy said too smoothly. “Jedi sympathizers,” another murmured, “are being offered integration; for the good of the galaxy.”

He redirected; politely, persistently. They only noticed near the end, which bought him just enough time to request his leave. He would have preferred an early exit, but his escort explained the corridor grid was slotted; his “walk window” could not be altered.

He was relieved when the signal finally came, and faintly surprised to find Myles himself waiting to take him back.

The Mandalorian made pleasant talk until they reached a grand hall where a staircase of black stone rose like a cut of cooled lava. “We’ll wait here a moment,” Myles said, voice mild, gaze unreadable behind the T-visor. “And you will remain silent. No matter what you see.”

Bail arched a brow but inclined his head. “Of course.”

They stood in the lee of a pillar. Air handlers whispered. The hall’s far door unsealed, and the reason for the pause arrived with choreographed inevitability.

Jango Fett entered first with his helmet under his arm, expression carved in iron he was flanked by a diamond of guards. Four more fell in behind, step-matched. In their midst walked a red-haired man in a blue tunic, flanked at two meters. Pale. Damp at the collar, as if steam still clung to his skin. The blue tunic was tailored perfectly to his body, Bail thought distantly. Perhaps this was the Mand’alors rumoured lover.

For three heartbeats Bail failed to recognize him, because the posture wasn't the posture he knew. Then the angle of the jaw, the set of the mouth, the beard he'd grown when he became a Knight…

Kenobi.

Every instinct Bail had; senator, spy, friend, surged to his throat and died there against Myles' earlier order. Obi-Wans name was on the tip of his tongue… but he had too much experience to let his own desperation effect his behaviour here.

They passed within twenty paces. Kenobi didn't look left or right. His gaze stayed fixed on some neutral point ahead, as if the floor were a balance beam and the drop on either side held knives. His right hand twitched once - thumb to ring finger, twice and went still. His eyes were puffy and red. It was terrible, seeing what had been done to his friend.

"Name," Jango said, almost conversational.

"Obi-Wan," came the answer, raw but steady.

"Place."

"Sundari."

"Direct."

"No." Obi-Wan's voice was so quiet Bail almost missed it.

The formation never broke stride. As they drew level, Jango's free hand lifted just enough to brush the nape of Kenobi's neck. Nothing more than a touch. Kenobi's shoulders loosened by a hair; his breath seemed to land again. It was intimate and tactical at once… ownership wrapped in reassurance.

Bail kept his face blank. The blue tiles under his boots might as well have been a blade's edge.

When the column had passed and the door at the far end sealed with a soft magnetic kiss, Myles inclined his helmet, as if acknowledging a successful demonstration.

"Thank you for your patience, Senator," he said lightly. "Your window is clear. This way, please."

Bail followed, polite smile back on his mouth, heartbeat drumming in his throat. The suite waiting for him would be tasteful, the locks quiet, the message loud.

They had Kenobi and they were destroying him. Bending him into whatever that creature was, a shadow of the man he'd known. He should have been relieved to see him alive, but instead he mourned another of the dead.

This Empire… this Mand'alor; had curated the moment he would learn it, and measured exactly how silent he could be at his friend's funeral procession.

He didn’t shed a tear. He was being watched; of course he was. If they were testing for weakness, they would not find it here.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Tender-Droid Tissues .... the tissues chosen by fanfiction readers throughout the galaxy....

Chapter 28: The Path

Chapter Notes

> I hope I didn't kark this up with the unsettling, weird dream sequence? Please let me know what you think... and if you see a place for improvement. Thanks!

He was running.

Corridors, endless and identical. No doors. Just angles that turned into more angles, as if the palace was growing out to meet his stride. The lights hummed high and thin until it felt like a wire piercing behind his eyes. Thumb to ring finger, once, twice a clicking sound in his ears then a voice saying "hold." but nothing changed. Still, he ran.

At last, the hall opened and swallowed itself into a cavern of water.

Pools. Dozens. Their surfaces held the cave's blue stars, a sky lowered into stone. Steam curled into impossible patters, images of himself as a jedi working with Jango, learning to trust him, chasing Jango, being chased by him… Investigating Jango and then mourning him... He turned to leave; the corridor was gone. Only a wall of rock where it had been, sealing with a soft magnetic kiss that made his stomach drop.

He wasn't alone.

A path of darker stone cut through the pools. Stay on the path, a voice said that might have been his, might have been Cody's. He stepped onto the strip and the tile gave a fraction, like a lung. The hum in the lights sharpened, a blade drawn slow.

"The Force is within all living things," Qui-Gon stepped out of the darkness.

"Name," said the room, mild and everywhere.

"Obi-Wan," he answered, because not answering felt like drowning.

"Place."

"Sundari."

"Direct."

He opened his mouth and nothing came out. The air didn't land. Thumb to ring finger—once, twice.

"Hold," he said.

The stars in the ceiling froze. The steam hung mid-curl. Even the water seemed to still. Only one thing moved: a hand he could not see yet, crossing the room toward the back of his neck.

“Hold,” answered a second voice, and the sound logged itself into the stone.

“The Force is in your very cells,” Qui-Gon said quickly. “And you are Stewjonian.” He paused “We don’t have much time. He’s about to put it back on.”

Fingers found the nape, warm and inevitable, and breath returned like a leash being given slack. He didn’t turn. He didn’t have to.

“There’s no exit here but me,” Jango said, close to his ear, as if the cave itself had leaned down to speak. “You should know by now; I don’t do chances.”

The path went forward. He went forward.

“Your people are highly sort after by slavers… can you guess the reason why?” jango’s voice buzzed from the back of his head.

He kept his eyes on the path and not on the water to either side, where shadows pooled under the light, jedi laying face up in the water, eyes wide but not blinking.

There in the centre of the room a dark mangled shape grew, he tried to not see it but it chased him until he did look, the floor was scattered with training helmets and too-small boots. Not helmets. Not boots. Tags. Rows of white rectangles with stenciled digits. Some had slid, some overlapped. A child’s hand; only a hand, rested palm-up among them, light flickering over the whorls as if the cave were deciding whether to keep it.

“Compassion,” said another voice, Vexa’s metronome, “mapped to care protocol.”

Cody stepped out of steam ahead of him, then wasn’t Cody, then was again; iron behind the eyes. “You carried us,” he said, not accusing, not kind. “Don’t stop now.”

His feet were wet. He didn’t remember stepping off the path. The water lapped at his ankles, his shins, the pearly cast of it strange and beautiful and wrong. He tasted metal as if the cave had poured a coin into his mouth. The suppressor buzzed against his skin, a ring colder than bone.

Jango was there again, beside him. His hand ran down his arm, and he realised suddenly that he was naked. He tried to back out of the water but couldn’t move. And he knew with terrible clarity what was going to happen to him. “Please no.” he said. But it did nothing. He couldn’t escape this.

“Stewjoni physiology is fascinating… two hearts, two lungs, dual in nature… dual in sex.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “don’t please don’t.”

A hand was pulling him into the water. He didn’t want to drown, he didn’t want to drown.

“The Stewjoni evolved very differently to most sentient species. Dual sex, ironically because they don’t have two distinct sexes’.” He was pulled onto a naked lap and a hand ran over his chest and another trailed over his stomach. “There is only one gender. All Stewjoni have both male and female genitals… though they present a little differently from most base humans.”

His stomach was growing, deforming before his eyes. He was pregnant. He felt sick.

Above the far pool, Quinlan’s hands moved in the air, signing fast… DON’T… WAIT… LOOK. But each shape turned into a mythosaur skull mid-gesture and sank. The light bar flicked on along the wall and began to sweep left to right, a slow pendulum. His eyes caught it. His lungs followed it. In for four. Out for six. Jango’s palm at his nape praised him without words.

“Good,” the cave said through Jango’s mouth. “You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

A knife burst out of his stomach turning the world red, Obi-Wan struggled, panicked “nothing happened!” he screamed out.

He wept and couldn’t feel the tears leave his face, only the warmth at his neck and the way his shoulders softened on command. He tried to say please, and the cave wrote it as “logged” on the surface of the water in ripples.

Somehow, he wasn’t in the water anymore, but on the path. The path narrowed until it was a leash. Until it was a vein. Until it entered the next pool and kept going, dark beneath the surface like a road under ice.

“Walk,” Jango said, casual, the way he said it at dinner. “Or be carried.”

He stepped into the water again… it kept bringing him back and back and back. Heat wrapped his knees. The natural stone benches under the surface were shaped like ribs. He felt two beats inside his chest that weren’t syncing and wanted to retch; the water held him kindly by the hips and would not let him.

“Education,” said the cave, Verin’s voice now, patient as a ledger. “Language shaping. Past tense: When I was Jedi…”

“I am,” he tried, and the word dissolved on his tongue. He could not remember its taste. He could not remember the door that had brought him here.

Something soft brushed inside him, somewhere he did not have a name for, a seam he had never learned to count. The cave noticed it with the indifferent curiosity of a medic changing a dressing and moved on. He burned with the knowledge and the not-knowing at once.

Across the pool, a gallery appeared, as if he were looking through glass into the household sitting room. Quinlan sat on the far couch, hands folded. Ahsoka stood in profile, young and old at once. Satine’s nephew passed behind them in another color’s armor, and his face… Satine’s eyes, did not turn.

“Place,” said the room again, almost gentle.

He looked down. The path was gone, dropping away. Only water and the mythosaur carved into the far wall, mouth open in invitation or threat.

"Sundari," he said, and the cave nodded.

"Direct," said Jango, and touched the nape once more, and the pools became the dining room.

He walked because there was no other verb left to him.

He went before Jango, who's chair was sat upon the table and he said, "Hold," and the world obeyed… everything but the hand at his neck, which never stopped.

He woke on a gasp, the taste of metal still a film on his tongue, fingers already tapping thumb to ring finger…once, twice. Just to hear something he could control. The room was dark. The light bar slept. Somewhere, very near, a voice he could not place said quietly:

"Logged."

Vexa was called to the household's self-contained surveillance room. Obi-Wan's biometrics had tripped the night threshold again… ten minutes in amber, now edging red. On the screen: restless cycles, abrupt spikes, sweat-dark at the collar, breath rate ragged. Audio flagged with repeated phrases: "Stop… please… don't -" and, once, the brittle lie: "Nothing happened."

She sat, palms flat on the console. "Show me the last forty minutes," she said. The night tech scrubbed back; Vexa watched the pattern; light sleep, plunge, panic crest, surface repeating like a rip current.

"Durations past an hour," the tech said, low. "Requesting medical advice."

"Environment." She ticked it off, metronome-steady. "Drop ambient one point five degrees. Increase airflow to ten percent. Shift room lighting to two percent warm. Crack the door thirty centimetres."

Settings slid into place on the schematic; in Obi-Wan's feed, the light softened, the air moved.

"Orientation. Open intercom, single direction."

A green light winked.

"Obi-Wan," Vexa said, voice level. "Vexa. You're in Sundari, household bedroom. You're in your bed. You are safe. Name."

On the screen his jaw worked; no answer. His hands clawed at the sheet, then stilled, then clenched again.

“Place,” she cued. “Sundari.”

He muttered something without shape and turned hard onto his side. Heart rate climbed.

“Light bar on the headboard. Bring it up at point six hertz, brightness five percent. Breath ladder overlay: four in, six out.”

The thin holo-strip woke and began its steady sweep. On the audio, Vexa matched pace, same cadence she used in the day. “In for four. Out for six. Again. In… two… three… four. Out… two… three… four… five… six.”

The lines on the monitor hesitated. A swallow. A rough sound: “Don’t…don’t…please.”

Vexa continued, unshaken. “Water glass to table, no touch. Station one guard in the doorway.”

“Logged,” the tech said. The door on the live feed opened a fraction wider; a guard edged into frame, palms open, then went still.

Vexa watched the numbers. Too high, too long. She flicked her gaze to the night nurse. “Page Mij. Standing consult.”

“Paging.”

“Two-way audio. If he surfaces, we ground fast.”

The tech toggled the channel. “Live.”

“Obi-Wan,” Vexa said, calmer still. “Vexa. If you can hear me, say ‘Hold’ and we will pause everything except air. Otherwise: in for four. Out for six.”

A long, stuttering breath. Then another. His hand lifted, thumb finding ring finger… once, twice. The next inhale matched closer to the bar’s sweep. The exhale lengthened. Heart rate shaved five points, then four more, held, flirted with another spike.

“Content,” Vexa said to the room, quiet. “Flag: ‘Nothing happened.’ - No probing in the morning block.” She let one beat pass. “Adjust his schedule: push physio by one hour, light range only. Annex class start at second bell. Note to ba’jur’alor: begin with values mapping, not historical content.”

“Logged,” the night tech murmured, fingers moving.

Sound pinged; Mij on audio. “Vexa.”

“Nightmare sustained, catecholamines high, responding to bar and ladder but slow,” she reported. “No touch to date. Consider pharmacologic?”

“Check blink cadence,” Mij said. “If he’s orienting, avoid meds, keep the skill tether. If he spikes again past ninety percent of earlier peak for more than three minutes, authorize cool cloth to forehead and sternum, no pressure, gloved, announce-and-ask. Intranasal only if we hit arrhythmia risk or emesis.”

“Copy,” Vexa said. “Remain on line.”

She leaned closer to the mic. “Obi-Wan. Vexa. You’re not alone. In for four. Out for six. Say ‘water’ if you want it. Say ‘Hold’ if you need a pause.”

On the feed, his eyes cracked open; unfocused, then finding the bar. He licked dry lips. “W… water,” he rasped.

“Deliver,” Vexa said. “Announce.”

The guard at the door didn’t cross the threshold; the night nurse did, slow and visible. “Announcing approach,” she said into the room. “Bringing the glass to the bedside table. No touch.” She set it down where he could see, stepped back to the line.

Obi-Wan pushed up on one elbow; the exhale stuttered, then smoothed. He reached, drank, set the glass back with a tiny clink. His gaze found the light bar again like a ship sighting shore.

“In for four,” Vexa kept time. “Out for six.”

The beeping steadied. Sweat cooled at his temple. The line of his shoulders lost a notch of defensive curl.

After a minute: “Name,” Vexa prompted, soft.

A beat. “Obi-Wan.”

“Place.”

“Sundari.”

“Direct.”

A rasp that almost smiled. “No… no direct.” He swallowed. “Sleep.”

“Logged,” Vexa said, the word gentled. “Light bar to sleep mode. Hold cadence for five minutes, then taper. Door remains ajar. No further interventions unless redline returns.”

She muted the mic and stood. “Night note to Jango detailing intervention,” she said. Then, to the nurse: “Place a dry tunic on the chair within reach, no comment. Rotate the watch in thirty. Debrief at first light.”

She took one last look at the screen, Obi-Wan had curled onto his side. His numbers were stabilising… good.

She turned and left. The night staff would alert her if there were any more issues.

Bail was escorted by six guards in full beskar. Their route curved off the senator-safe corridors; the floor tiles weren't blue. He clocked that at once. He had faced tyrants before and understood the message: you will not find your way back alone.

They halted before twin doors worked in black steel, each sheet etched with the skull of a mythosaur. The seals broke with a hydraulic sigh. Beyond lay the throne room.

It had been built to make men small.

The ceiling rose into shadow hung with banners; the walls were carved in relief… warriors and storms, blades and beasts… each figure a meter taller than reality. A dais of dark stone shouldered up from the far end of the hall, and upon it, in a chair of the same black, sat the Mand'alor.

Bail bowed. The guards did not move.

When he began to rise, a gloved hand settled on the back of his head and held him there. The pressure wasn't cruel; it was inarguable. Weighted down by beskar.

"Let him rise," said a voice that needed no introduction; calm, amplified, and lately piped across every holo in the Core. Even un-boosted, it seemed to carry; Bail had the unwelcome sense the room was shaped to catch it and amplify it. Another intimidation tactic not lost amongst the calculations tangled up in his mind.

The weight lifted. Bail stood.

Jango Fett sat as if the chair were a post and he were on duty, helmet resting on one knee, expression carved in iron. Around the perimeter, visors turned in perfect unison to follow Bail's line; the slightest shift of metal on leather.

"Senator Organa," Jango said without bother. No theatrics beyond the room itself. "You found our hospitality efficient?"

Bail's mouth shaped the practiced line. "Impeccable."

"Good." A flick of fingers; the guards behind Bail took one step back, still close enough to be an intimidating presence, he felt no less stalked. "You were routed in on a restricted corridor. For your safety." The corner of Jango's mouth ticked… something that wasn't quite humor. "Blue tiles are for guests. This is not a guest wing."

Bail kept his hands loose at his sides and did not glance down. "I'm grateful for the clarification."

“Clarification is a kindness we offer freely,” Jango said. “Freedom, less so.”

Silence drew out, the kind that weighed more than noise. Bail could feel the room listening.

“We will address your friendships.”

The word landed without force and somehow with more weight for it.

Bail inclined his head; a senator’s acquiescence measured to the millimetre. “As you wish, Mand’alor.”

“Excellent.” Jango set the helmet aside on the arm of the throne and rested both hands on the black stone, self-assured in the power he owned “You may approach. Stay to the centre line. Do not deviate.”

Bail stepped forward along a strip of darker stone that might have been a seam and might have been a guide. The guards tracked him plants to the sun.

The doors sealed behind him with that soft magnetic kiss he was already starting to hate. The message was as clear as the air was dry:

You will rise when told. You will walk where we say. You will speak when we ask.

He felt small, as intended. Naming it offered little comfort.

“Let me get straight to the point, Senator,” Jango said. “As you are aware, Maul is overseeing the conversion of the Temple into a museum.” He let the quiet breath, then continued, “I have need of him elsewhere. I require another to take over and implement our plans. You are well suited to the post… unless you disagree.”

Bail’s mind moved quickly. “I’m humbled by the offer. But I have duties to Alderaan…”

A hand lifted; the objection died neatly. “We are all part of this new Empire now. Including you.” Jango’s gaze did not waver. “Your world is known for its outspoken support of the Jedi. Even after I revealed the truth, many cling to false doctrine. As such, you will no longer be needed on Alderaan. I am appointing a governor to guide it into the future.”

“I see.” Bail bowed his head a fraction. “May I ask what precipitated that decision? Have not I, and my people, transitioned peacefully under your rule?”

“Peaceful is not loyal,” Jango said. “Compliance buys patience, not indulgence.” He leaned back a hair, the throne absorbing nothing. “At the Temple you will be useful. Your reputation in the Core. Your cultivated probity. The optics of ‘Organa’ standing beneath exhibits on Jedi crimes will accelerate the public’s understanding.”

A beat. “Decline, and I appoint my governor regardless, and, lower the integration thresholds on Alderaan. Our centres are being built across the galaxy. The Alderaanian system’s facility is… substantial.” The slight curve of his mouth wasn’t kindness. “Accept, and Alderaan keeps its Senate voice, and its current relief guarantees.” The terms hung in the air like a

signed contract. “You will open within ninety days. Curation follows the approved schedule. Publicly, the curators answer to you. Privately, they answer to me.”

The hall was very quiet.

Bail inclined his head once more, the gesture as precise as a cut. “Then we should discuss scope, Mand’alor. If you intend this museum to educate, it must be thorough.”

Jango’s mouth tipped by a millimetre. “That is why you are here.” He lifted the helmet, set it back upon his knee, and nodded to the side doors. “Come. We’ll begin.”

Anakin sat in his cell. Today was the day.

He’d be presented to his new clan, the same one that had taken Ahsoka in. Clan Rex. Ahsoka had said he was progressing through integration in record time. He’d earnt it… Family, she’d called it. Not the performative kind the Jedi offered. A real one.

There was a plan. He’d graduate, receive land and a home, a place of honour. Teach at the new temple. Travel the galaxy and help people. Make it work.

Padme wouldn’t like that he’d yielded to this Empire, but she shouldn’t be surprised. He’d yielded to an empire before… Though it died before it was fully born. Palpatine had been weaker than he’d thought.

Padme was probably being stubborn somewhere safe; the thought made him smile, helplessly fond. Bail still had her hidden, but Ahsoka had been by, and he’d told her how to find Padme, how to reach the twins. Sensible. Necessary. Family needed to be together.

Ahsoka had been vague about Obi-Wan. “Safe,” she said. “Well.” Palace housing. Of course. Obi-Wan always landed on his feet. Probably flirting at the right tables, charming the right people, smiling that smile, trading a cell for silk sheets.

Footsteps paused outside. Locks clacked in sequence. The door slid open; two helmets, visors blank and depthless.

“Skywalker,” one said. “With us.”

He stood, smoothed his tunic, and let hope into his belly. An honest family without lies. Something to proudly share rather than hide away. He could do this.

He did not think of Obi-Wan again until the corridor turned toward the palace wing.

“Team lead, Skywalker secure and walking.” One of them said into their Vambrace.

“Logged,” someone said loud enough to for him to hear.

Chapter 29: Run Rabbit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Obi-Wan was led to Mij, who was waiting in the classroom annex. Obi-Wan was shown to his seat and took it without needing to be prompted.

Mij didn't fill the silence right away, reading something on his slate before looking up at Obi-Wan, looking him over carefully.

He set his slate down, palms open on either side, voice clinic-steady.

"I understand the Mand'alor spoke to you about your heritage," he said. "I'm here for the medical half. Words only. No touch. You can say 'Hold' at any point and I'll stop."

Obi-Wan's gaze fixed somewhere past Mij's shoulder. "He said I'm not base human."

"Correct," Mij said. "You're Stewjonian. That's biology, not a challenge to identity. You are a man; full stop. Stewjonian physiology simply comes with differences you need to be aware of because they affect your care going forward."

A beat. Thumb to ring finger - once, twice.

"Go on," Obi-Wan said at last.

"First: cardiopulmonary. Two hearts in a cooperative rhythm. It changes how we dose anaesthesia, how we read hypoxia, and why panic spikes feel like they're ripping your chest in two; because two pumps are racing, not one. You've felt that."

Obi-Wan's mouth tightened; he didn't deny it.

"Second: endocrine and muscle. Higher baseline tone, faster recovery when we don't spook you, different response to stimulants. It's why the intranasal worked like it did, and why your physio stays in a narrow band."

A small shift of Obi-Wan's shoulders; not agreement, not dissent.

"Third," Mij said, voice unchanged, "reproductive anatomy and culture. Stewjonians evolved in isolation. In their language there isn't a male/female distinction, there's one social category for 'adult person.' Biologically speaking there is no distinct male or female, not at birth, not at puberty. Out in the wider galaxy you present - and live, as a man. Both statements can be true at once."

Obi-Wan's breath caught. "Hold."

Mij stopped. He didn't move, didn't fill the space. When Obi-Wan's fingers tapped ring again, he resumed at the same tempo.

“Anatomically,” Mij continued, “The Stewjonian people carry a secondary, internal reproductive tract. It’s sealed by a soft mucosal veil and remains dormant unless there is specific hormonal priming or deliberate mechanical stimulation. In ordinary life it stays closed. It does not ‘open by accident’ while you sit, train, or bathe. I am not going to ‘activate’ anything in an examination. However, once the veil has been activated there is no deactivating it, you will go into a secondary puberty.”

He let that sit, clean and unadorned.

“As well as that, stewjoni testes are only partly external, as such they appear smaller that most base humans. However, they are comparable in size, and perfectly functional.”

“Hold.” Obi-Wan said voice strained trying to give himself time to understand all this information… all these things he didn’t know. Why had the jedi never told him? Why had Qui-Gon?

After a moment Mij continued “It is understandable that you might have assumed you had a congenital issue, undescended testes are not unheard off… however just between and behind the testes is the mucosal veil... It is largely hidden, there wasn’t a lot for you to go off, I don’t want you to think you should have known. It isn’t as obvious as many might think.”

“Hold.” Obi-Wan tried again. But Mij appeared to want to get through the main points quickly.

“You are a textbook Stewjonian in both genetics and phenotype,” Mij added. “To most species you appear male. Appearances are incomplete, not wrong.”

Obi-Wan huffed a sharp, joyless sound. “I used to think Jango appeared as just another murderous bounty hunter. Turns out he’s an evil overlord. Similar… only the scale changes. I could have loved a murderer; overlords don’t have the capacity for love, and it would be wasted on one.”

Mij didn’t bite. He logged the phrasing and stayed with the brief. “Temple records and several civilian registries were redacted,” he said. “Motives vary; slaver targeting risk, political optics, the Order’s risk calculus… your unique situation with being a stewjoni force sensitive. We can debate that with Vexa present. My remit is helping you to understand the medical consequences.”

Silence. Vent hum. Footsteps somewhere down the hall.

“Am I…” Obi-Wan swallowed. “Biologically capable of… carrying?”

“Biologically, yes,” Mij said, even. “Practically, not now. Your system isn’t hormonally primed; your current meds, and recent repairs keep the body in ‘protect and heal.’ Nothing in your routine will change that. And again: I will not cross that line here.”

“What do you need from me?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Information first,” Mij said. He nudged the slate forward slowly enough it could be refused. “A diagram pack. You can choose pictures or words-only narration. After that: we review non-contact imaging from surgery with distance markers, so you see what I see. No touch.”

“Why now?” Obi-Wan’s voice was brittle.

“Because surprises hurt,” Mij said. “You were always going to be informed, the need for that has simply progressed. Better you hear it cleanly here than in a corridor and we spend the night de-escalating.”

A long breath. Obi-Wan didn’t look up. “Show me the diagrams.”

“Logged,” Mij said. The slate lit with a clean schematic - no skin tones, no suggestive shading. Lines and labels and the steady cadence of a voice naming what was there.

At the end of the first page, Obi-Wan’s fingers tapped ring again - once, twice.

“Hold,” he said… not because he was falling, but because he needed a moment, or moments. “I have… mammary glands?”

Mij nodded. “Smaller than baseline human. Set deeper - partially shielded beneath the ribs. Stewjoni are a warrior culture; that placement likely protected against trauma. There are ducts that pass between the ribs, protected by muscle, to the papilla - nipple.”

Silence again. Vent hum. Distant boots.

Obi-Wan stood abruptly, shaking his head. “Jango is - he’s going to…” He looked down at Mij, breath fraying. “Please. Don’t let this happen.”

Mij lifted a hand. Out by the door, the guards came alert.

“Please sit down, Obi-Wan,” Mij said slowly and clearly.

Obi-Wan’s jaw worked. “You’re all just as responsible for this as he is.”

Mij didn’t react to the barb. “Obi-Wan, sit down. I won’t ask again.”

Obi-wan swallowed, flicked a glance at the guards now three paces nearer, and sat.

Mij didn’t relax. The shadows under his eyes had deepened. “Do you understand that as Jango’s soulbearer, part of the role is to bear his children?”

“I - That’s the role he wants for me. I don’t consent to this… to this role.” Obi-Wan’s hands shook. “Please. He shouldn’t get to choose this for me.”

“He didn’t,” Mij replied without hesitation. “The Manda did.”

Obi-Wan’s gaze searched his face. “You don’t believe that too.”

Mij looked down a beat, then back up. “I didn’t. Things change. People change. I’ve seen events that defy any other explanation. You are what he says you are.”

Something in Obi-Wan went white and quiet. “You’re going to let him rape me… because what? Because of the clones? Yes, it was an injustice… but you’re all forgetting he was a large part of that operation himself.”

Mij held his stare a moment, then spoke toward the door. “Fetch Vexa.” He gathered his slate, checking he’d left nothing behind. “I’m not cleared to discuss that with you.”

He rose. “If you have further questions about your biology or medical needs, tell Vexa. She’ll schedule another session.”

Mij left. Obi-Wan watched the door slide close, knowing he didn’t have the same freedom.

Moments later Vexa entered, composed as ever. “The Mand’alor will dine with us tonight,” she said. “Afterward, in the sitting room, the Mand’alor will answer any additional questions you have. Your lessons are done for today; your normal curriculum will return tomorrow.”

Obi-Wan nodded. His eyes distant.

After lunch, Obi-Wan asked to return to his rooms. His request was granted without friction, likely because the night’s nightmares were still sitting in his chart.

He lay quiet until the watchers should be convinced: long enough for their attention to drift, for them to grow bored of a feed showing a man at rest. Then he rose and slipped into the fresher. Days ago he’d swiped a treasure and hidden it in the one place they didn’t watch - so long as he gave them no reason to.

He hadn’t even considered the main room. Not under the mattress. Too obvious; too easy to wand for metal. Here, there were pipes and fixtures - plenty of background noise to hide one small, ferromagnetic shape.

He’d chosen the scalpel blade for exactly that reason. It clung to the back of a pipe under the sink, where they kept a stash of cleansing and styling products he’d never touch. The cupboard had been locked, yes - but a thoughtless mistake made weeks earlier had left him a route in. He hadn’t been about to call attention to it.

Cody had the room swept daily; Obi-Wan could read the faint tells when he returned; creased sheet corners, a misaligned cup, the hairline shift of a chair. Cody was nothing if not fastidious. But even he could be fooled, if one knew how. And he hadn’t found the blade.

Obi-Wan eased it free now, cold and thin against his palm.

He'd sown this weeks ago, in the chaos he'd let them see. He hadn't needed to fake anything- only to aim it. A swing at Mij, a tray clattering, the red zone called. They'd read his breaking like a status light and congratulated themselves on their strength. A fragile thing invites underestimation.

They were right about the break.
They were wrong about the rest.

They'd unwittingly handed him everything he needed. He had a stylus no one had noticed was missing after his unsettling conversation with Mij. He cut a narrow strip from his sleeve, married metal to plastic until the grip felt right, and pressed the join against his palm: firm.

He pocketed it, returned to the bed, and tapped the comm. "Vexa," he said, even. "I'm awake. Ready to continue."

Vexa could be very accommodating, within reason. She responded to respect and precise asks. Extra cup of tea? Logged, approved. A particular window to read by? Logged, approved.

"Today," he said when she arrived, hands visible, "I'd like the west gallery alcove. The light is better for reading."

"Logged," Vexa replied, and inclined her head. "Approved. Two-meter flanks. Hands remain visible."

The alcove sat beside the reinforced service access. He knew the cadence of the palace by now: in approximately five minutes a trolley would pass through, headed wherever Kira had scheduled it. One delivery a day. He was almost never here to see it.

He was today.

They settled him in the chair. Guards posted: one at the far end of the corridor, one at the near; two more ghosting the flanks. Vexa verified his slate, checked his water, and stepped back to her mark.

Thumb to ring finger- once, twice.

He read. Or looked like it. The text scrolled; his eyes didn't track.

Boots on stone. A distant hiss of seals. The low electric whirr of a trolley's motor. He must have tensed because Vexa was eyeing him again.

"Name?" Vexa prompted, routine and calm.

"Obi-Wan."

"Place."

"Sundari."

“Direct.”

“Read,” he said, and the corner of her mouth softened by half a degree. She took out her own slate.

The service panel’s status light shifted from red to amber. A key-code pinged, quiet as a breath. The slab folded in; steam-scent and citrus-clean air rolled through. Two staffers in grey pushed the trolley, heads down, badges forward. They did not look at him. No one ever looked at him here.

He adjusted in the chair, casual. The sleeve hid the narrow strip he’d cut. The stylus sat innocuous on the armrest, its new weight balanced perfectly against his palm. He timed his breath to the trolley’s hum, to the guard’s habitual glance left to the tiny pause Vexa always took before she logged the handoff.

Predictable. Predictable. Predictable.

The trolley drew level. The near guard turned to clear a corner sightline, exactly as trained. The far guard’s gaze ticked to Vexa when she said, “Secure the access.”

Thumb to ring finger- once, twice.

Then he moved.

He yanked the trolley hard, pivoting on the rear wheels; metal screamed and the cart slammed the near guard in the shins. Momentum carried it into the second, crashing into an ankle, knee, a tangle of legs and cursing. In the same motion he ripped the staffer’s badge free- one quick slash with the lashed blade, lanyard parting with a whisper and shoved the trolley’s nose into the service door’s track. The slab tried to close, kissed metal, stalled, rebounded to half.

“Red- west gallery!” Vexa snapped. “Contain without touch. Seal Tier Two.”

He was already through.

He slipped the gap sideways, felt the door’s edge brush his hip, and hit the back corridor- narrow, bright, smelling of detergent and hot circuitry. He ran.

Alarms hadn’t hit yet; he had seconds. The map in his head was part guesswork, part a lifetime of exits. Down was always better- gravity was faster than men.

A checkpoint loomed: a dozen guards. He eased to a walk, loose and bored, badge visible between his fingers.

“Hello there,” he said, as if he owned the floor.

“Halt,” one of them barked.

He did, eyebrow up, polite as a clerk. “Of course. Problem?”

“I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Oh… no. New.” He lifted the badge a fraction. “Vexa put me on-”

A hand flicked, impatient. “On your way.”

Vexa’s name was a skeleton key. He walked on, pace steady, until boots thundered behind the wall he’d just cleared. Then he ran, fear at his heels.

He palmed the badge to the next panel and prayed the staffer’s clearance hadn’t been pulled in the last heartbeat. Green. The door peeled open.

Thumb to ring finger- once, twice.

He cut across a laundry bay as dryers hummed, steam ghosting. A worker looked up, blinked, reached for a comm. Obi-Wan didn’t break stride; the stylus-blade flashed and the comm hit the floor in two pieces. He kept running.

“Name,” a voice in memory said.

Obi-Wan.

“Place.”

Sundari.

“Direct.”

Down.

Stairs appeared like an answered prayer; steel treads, harsh-lit, dizzying. He took them three at a time.

Above, Vexa’s voice carried faintly, metronome-steady: “Team Bravo to Dock Two. Team Delta to Kitchen Junction. He is unarmed; do not engage wrists, upper arms only. Contain at thresholds.”

Second landing. Another reader. He slapped the card- red. Breath hitched… once, twice- then steadied. He slid the blade under the faceplate and levered; plastic popped, wires bared. No time to think. He bridged two with the metal tip on instinct. The lock thunked. He shouldered through.

The corridor narrowed to bare concrete and exposed pipe. Air went colder. Somewhere above, the alarms finally found their voice; low, pulsing, too measured to be panic.

He didn’t look back.

He ran.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EcGgHPr5JQ

Chapter 30: Arteries

Chapter Notes

> To my friends on Tumblr I'm sorry to say I had to delete my account. It's a long story and I'm not up to getting into it here. But know it wasn't anything any of you said or did. It was an outside issue beyond my or any of your control....
>
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRIQARH6-VE&list=RDcRIQARH6-VE&start_radio=1

Not long enough ago…
Hondo made a show of counting the credits twice, but the way his eyes slid to Jango said the price had been fixed long before Obi-Wan hit dirt. Credits changed hands; the pirates thinned like a tide of scum and villainy.

Jango didn't release Obi-Wan's upper arm until they were inside Slave I. The binders came off with a decisive click. His fingers paused at the collar; old beskar-laced make, and traced the rim as if reading a familiar text.

"I'm sorry," he said, almost idle. "Mandalorians invented these out of necessity. The Jedi were our ancient enemies. Keeping the Empire out of the Republic was… a desperate struggle." He leaned in and let his breath fog the metal, like a pilgrim touching a relic. "This was common among our ancestors."

"Are you removing it?" Obi-Wan asked.

A beat of real hesitation. Then Jango keyed the latch. The suppressor thumped into his palm.

Relief hit like air after drowning. The Force rushed back, a deeper current: a cool prickle along his wrists, the faintest pressure at the base of his skull. Not words… but a shift in the weight of the moment, the sense of doors that only opened one way. A glint of beskar in a dark hall. A hand at the nape. A voice saying *I've got you*.

Danger, the Force breathed, quiet and certain. Not the blaster on his hip. *The orbit.*

Obi-Wan steadied his breath and opened his eyes. Jango's pupils were blown wide. He stepped back, smile crooked in the way that used to feel like sunlight and now felt staged.

"Do you need something in return?" Obi-Wan asked, bracing for the ledger.

Jango's mouth tipped. "Couldn't I have just wanted to rescue you?" A shrug, too casual. "Maybe not everything between us is a transaction."

Every warning bell in Obi-Wan rang with the Force's low note, a slender wire drawn tight. He inclined his head anyway. "Then… thank you."

"Anytime," Jango said, gaze lingering a heartbeat where the collar had been.

Obi-Wan filed the warning away like a splinter: small, undeniable, already working inward.

Back aboard the *Negotiator*, Cody met him at the ramp, unworried. "Knew you'd be fine. You always are sir."

"Listen, Cody." Obi-Wan kept his voice mild. "What do you know about your prime? Jango Fett. I'm assuming you know him."

Cody stilled. "Of course. Back when I was coming up he was still involved with our training… what exactly do you want to know?"

"I don't know exactly." Obi-Wan's fingers found his beard, thoughtful. "It's just… something's not right. Haven't you noticed how often he turns up at the right place and time? Right when he's needed."

Cody shrugged. "He's taken a liking to you. He's a good friend to have… one you clearly need."

Obi-Wan looked past him, out to the lane traffic. "His kind never do anything without wanting something in return." A beat. "I'm beginning to think there's more at play."

Cody snorted "Fetts a simple man just trying to make his way in a war torn galaxy, he likes you, it's a good thing… useful."

Still not long enough ago… plus one hour.

Cody found a quiet corner by a maintenance locker and signalled Jango on their encrypted channel. The cipher handshakes flickered, clean and practiced.

"Foxglove," Cody said, the prearranged opener. "Kenobi's asking questions. About you."

Static breathed. Then Jango: "How deep."

"Not past the waterline. Yet."

A pause long enough to count three heartbeats. "Understood," Jango said. "Clock's moving. Sith won't stay buried. I wanted more runway."

"So did I," Cody said. He hesitated. "He's… listening to the wrong part of his gut."

“Then give him something else to focus on,” Jango said, voice gone iron and distance. “Keep him steady. I’ll adjust approach.”

The channel clicked dead. Cody stared at the dull metal of the locker until his reflection blurred, then squared his shoulders and went back to work.

Vexa was mid-coordination when Ren confirmed what she’d been worried about: a stylus lashed to a scalpel blade. Improvised knife. Protocol flipped. “Update: subject armed. Capture priority; alive; minimize injury to subject and staff with subject as main priority. Teams Bravo/Delta: weapon before body. If blade visible, hands first; if not, elbows and shoulders only. Shutters to thirty. Foam and arc-nets authorized.” Acknowledgements clicked back in sequence. Vexa almost never swore. She did now. Kenobi was his own worst enemy.

“Bravo, you’re on his two; Delta, cut ahead to Dock Two. Eyes on hands. Do not chase; funnel. Team Echo to Laundry: pull staff, lock the bay. Ren, paint blue tiles to dead-ends. Cody, I want a single live route past Cam Fourteen. Medical: at the ready, sedation threshold to red while he’s moving. Logged.”

They had him on cameras, but he kept knifing down corridors they hadn’t predicted; of course he did. The escape had been smooth, almost elegant. She’d seen it in his file, he’d escaped from situations and prisons many times before; seeing it in motion was… impressive. Another facet of what made him exceptional and a reminder she was not here to be impressed.

She was tense, not rattled. There was nowhere for him to go. Even if he broke into the city, getting out of Sundari without clearance was near impossible, and the Empire would squeeze every gate he approached. He was trapped.

Trapped wasn’t safe. A cornered asset could still die, and if he did the Empire would be weaker for it. Unacceptable.

“Containment inside the palace is non-negotiable,” she said into the channel, voice flat. “Keep him moving on the lane we give him. We secure the weapon; we protect the Runi’oyay’dinuir and bring him home.”

They had funnelled him cleanly: main service entrance, doors sealed fore and aft, a semicircle of helmets and raised palms. He’d known it, but other than attempting to throw them off by unexpected turns, there was little to be done about it… there were too few exits from the palace. Still, he couldn’t panic; he had a plan.

Vexa stepped forward from behind the arc, eyes flicking over him; injury check, then dipped a nod and spoke into her vambrace. “Subject surrounded, condition good. Medical to standby. Bring in Mij.”

Obi-Wan could feel the walls closing in, knew with certainty what would happen to him if they took him back. Knew what he would not be able to prevent and… knew he’d rather die. He would take what ever escape he could. One way or another.

Swiftly he lifted the lashed blade to his throat and pressed until it bit into him, right above his carotid artery. Warm slid to his collarbone. Every visor tightened a fraction.

Vexa’s hand came up, palm flat, voice the same steady metronome that had gone from a steady presence to an anger inducing drone. “Runi’oyay’dinuir. There is nowhere to go. Lower the weapon.”

He laughed, a sound that didn’t feel like his. “You want me alive. That makes my life my leverage.”

“Correction.” Vexa inclined her chin toward the blade without stepping in. “That is a dead-man’s switch you cannot use. If you open your common carotid at that depth, with two pumps working well, you lose consciousness in seven to twelve seconds. We occlude the wound. You wake restrained. No exit. No leverage. With bacta there won’t even be a scar.”

A single drop hit stone, indecently loud to his own ears.

“You belong to Mandalore and to the Mand’alor,” she added, cool as water. “That is not a bargaining chip on this table.”

He couldn’t tap thumb to ring finger with the knife hand. His free hand twitched anyway.

“Two options,” Vexa said. “One: I open the breezeway. You walk; three metres clear, blade tip down to the floor. You sit. We breathe. No net while the point is down. Two: I authorise foam. You will not enjoy the next thirty seconds. Which do you choose?”

“Quinlan,” he said, baring his teeth. “Now.”

“Logged for scheduling if and only if Option One is chosen and maintained,” Vexa returned without blinking. “Not part of this moment.”

He took a slow step toward the exit; the line answered in kind, backward. “You’re gambling I won’t press harder,” he said softly. “You’re gambling that I’m bluffing.”

“I don’t gamble,” Vexa said, and toggled her vambrace, eyes still on him. “Bring Quinlan Vos. Authorised.”

The side doors hushed. Jango entered first, helmet under his arm, the Armorer a shadow half a pace to his left. Jango moved until he saw the blade and stopped. Colour leeched from his face by a shade. Good, Obi-Wan thought, small and vicious.

“It seems you’ll see me dead before you let me walk,” Obi-Wan said.

“This is a dangerous game,” Jango answered, gaze on the tremor at Obi-Wan’s knuckles. “Are you truly capable of it? Isn’t it against the Code?”

“I’m no Jedi,” Obi-Wan said, and the truth of it salted his tongue. “You saw to that. Either way, I walk out. On my feet or on a slab.”

Jango’s jaw worked once. “Stand down,” he said to the room, without taking his eyes off Obi-Wan. To Vexa: “Keep the corridor clear.”

Boots approached from behind the line, an easy, familiar cadence. Quinlan’s voice came first, low and warm. “Obi-Wan. What have you done now?”

“Do not cross the three-metre mark,” Vexa said, same even tone. “Rails apply.”

The guards at Quinlan’s shoulders held firm; Quinlan looked unbothered.

He stopped with his hands open and empty. “Didn’t expect our first visit to be so crowded.”

“Shut up, Quin,” Obi-Wan said, voice fraying at the edges.

“Look at me,” Quinlan answered, gentle. “Not at them. Me. I’m asking you, please don’t hurt yourself.”

For half a breath, Obi-Wan looked.

Jango’s voice threaded the quiet. “Put the blade down, cyar’ika. Walk with me. We’ll talk where you can breathe.”

Obi-Wan pressed a fraction harder. Heat tracked his sternum. “You touch me and I open it.”

Vexa didn’t move. “Point to the floor,” she said. “You asked; he’s here. Take the deal.”

Obi-Wan gave a thin laugh. “As the Mand’alor said, this is a dangerous game. How dangerous is up to you. Let him go. Quinlan, come to me.”

Mij hit the threshold, breath tight, eyes on the line of blood. He cut to Jango’s side. “At that depth, with two pumps, he could bleed out before we can occlude,” he said, urgent and low. “I can’t guarantee survival.”

Jango stared at Obi-Wan, gaze hard and calculating. Then he nodded once. “Do it.”

“Vos is released,” Vexa logged, without looking away. “Three metres. No touch.”

The guards at Quinlan’s shoulders eased back a pace; Quinlan crossed to Obi-Wan and stood beside him, close enough to see the sweat rolling down the back of his neck, far enough not to crowd.

Obi-Wan exhaled. “Good. You’re doing well, Mand’alor. I know conceding anything is a challenge for someone as arrogant as you.” The smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Now: everyone backs away from the entrance.”

Jango’s mouth didn’t change; his chin tipped a millimetre. “Clear the breezeway,” he said.

“Logged,” Vexa replied at once. “All units: fall to the rear line. No one crosses the blue.” Boots retreated in a measured wave. The service doors behind Vexa unsealed to a half-raise; a slit of cold corridor air slid across the floor.

Obi-Wan’s knuckles whitened on the makeshift hilt. He didn’t look at Jango. He didn’t look at Quinlan. He looked at the opening, and the opening looked back.

Chapter 31: A River Called Death

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a tension in his bones, electricity running down every tendon. His muscles were ready; his mind, sharp. Yes, his hands trembled: adrenaline will do that. He was learning to handle the Force's silence; learning to accept his own weaknesses.

He may not be a Jedi any longer, but he was still the man who had been. A general. A negotiator. He'd known early that escape would hinge on leverage.

Leverage was why he'd needed the knife. Why he'd waited. Because as time went on it became clear: the only leverage he had was himself; granted by their almost religious fixation on keeping him alive. Fortune… Fate. It hardly mattered.

"I want a shuttle. Now," he said, voice clear and strong. "Quinlan and I board and take off, clean. If I see anyone following, I won't negotiate further; I'll cut my throat. Do you understand?"

Jango's face stayed dark and still. "Understood." He flicked two fingers. "Walk."

Vexa's chin tipped. "Clear a shuttle to Dock Two. Transponder on maintenance silence for fifteen minutes."

"Acknowledged," came Ren's voice in her ear. Doors unsealed in a staggered line. Sundari's air wasn't fresh, but it beat the recycled breath of the palace. He let it run over his skin. Warm, unfiltered. Almost like freedom.

They moved as a slow procession. Three metres of space on either side of Obi-Wan and Quinlan; helmets following like tides; Vexa ghosting the edge of every threshold. The alarms had gone quiet.

This service corridor would normally be buzzing. They'd moved fast to clear it and re-route everything.

"Back up. You're surrounding us," Obi-Wan growled, eyes on the perimeter, every visor hungry for a single mistake, for the chance to separate him from his weapon.

"Very well, Runi'oyay'dinuir," Jango answered. The tone sent a shiver up Obi-Wan's spine. Jango did not do well with powerlessness; the stillness in him said it plain. He was enraged.

Obi-Wan swallowed his fear.

"Name," Quinlan said once, under the hum.

"Obi-Wan."

“Place.”

“Sundari.”

“Direct.”

“Out.”

Quinlan edged closer. “I need you to hear me. We don’t have much time. This might be our only chance to talk privately.” Whispered, frantic; and a new anxiety crept in.

Obi-Wan didn’t answer, only waited as they walked.

“There’s a lot more in play than you know,” Quinlan said. “I need you to trust me.”

“And I need you to have faith we can get out,” Obi-Wan returned.

Quinlan went quiet. They were almost there.

Dock Two opened ahead: a low, cavernous bay, an Aka’jor-class shuttle on its pad, nose to the exit shutter.

They backed up the ramp, eyes on the ring of guards. Many of the pauldrons weren’t household colours.

“No nets while the point is up,” Vexa said over comms. Then she toggled her amp so he could hear: “Listen carefully: this shuttle is configured for diplomats; its threshold sensors flag exposed weapons. Any bare blade above knee height will trigger a full shutdown and, if sustained, a gas release that will render you unconscious. You won’t like that, Runi’oyay’dinuir.”

Too late to demand an unmodified shuttle. As he stepped, he felt the calculation shift: the blade would have to lower.

Vexa killed the amp. “Rails update,” she said into her vambrace, eyes on Obi-Wan. “Weapon priority. Vos authorised hands-on only for blade control. Logged.”

Quinlan didn’t look away from Obi-Wan’s face. “Left foot first,” he murmured. “Blade low. On my three, we pivot and walk into the shuttle together. One.”

Obi-Wan’s breath hitched, steadied.

“Two.”

The external shutter cycled a fraction; a gust knifed across the threshold; cold enough to raise gooseflesh.

“Three.”

Quinlan moved.

Nothing like Temple katas; no flourish, no warning. His forearm slid under Obi-Wan's wrist; his other hand snapped the cloth lash, rotation driving the improvised hilt out and down. The blade hit with a bright, traitorous ring and skittered under the landing strut.

"Now," Vexa said.

The stun-net bloomed from the bay ceiling—white and sudden. Obi-Wan dove and flung himself after the blade. Quinlan was on him in a heartbeat.

Betrayal tore through him, raw and brutal, shaking its way into muscle and breath. The sound that left him was a wound.

Then he closed the door on the part of him that had loved his brother.

Quinlan was talking frantically, but it buzzed from far away. They rolled, messy and graceless, on and then off the edge of the ramp. Quinlan turned them in the fall, taking the brunt.

For the first time, Obi-Wan saw Quinlan's sleeves hitched up to the elbow. No band.

He scrambled up and ran.

Panic sent him the wrong way, away from the shuttle. He knew he couldn't beat Quinlan like this, not with the odds and the angle both against him.

A non-household guard fired a stunner; Obi-Wan zig-zagged through the arc, closed, and ripped the blaster free. He didn't have time to think past jamming the muzzle to his own temple and praying they'd believe him. His thumb hunted for the switch that would take it lethal and found nothing.

"I'll shoot," he said, voice shaking, as the ring closed in. No one slowed.

He fumbled frantically for the switch, kept the barrel to his skull.

Jango stepped forward, triumph in his eyes. The rush in Obi-Wan's ears went thin and high.

"You should know," Jango said, almost mild, "when we were alerted to your attempt, all non-household personnel turned in their blasters for shock models."

A panicked sob broke out of him.

Jango took another step; Obi-Wan snapped the muzzle toward the Mand'alor moments too late. From the flank, a stun-net arced. It folded him in a crackle and a rush, legs taken, arms cinched. He hit the deck on his side, breath smashed out of him; what came up was half gasp, half broken scream.

"Quin," he rasped; shock and fury in the same breath, as Quinlan approached. "Please… help… me."

Quinlan stayed where he was, hands open, shoulders heaving once. “Name,” he said, low and steady, a rope thrown into floodwater.

Obi-Wan’s eyes burned. “*Please*.”

“Name,” Quinlan repeated.

He sobbed and shut his eyes. “*Please… no*.”

“Secure the blade,” Vexa ordered into her comms from nearby. “Medical to Dock Two. Foam ready, but hold. Shock down to one-quarter; do not burn him.”

Ren slid under the shuttle on a dolly and came up with the scalpel-lashed stylus pinched in tongs. “Recovered.”

“Logged,” Vexa said. She glanced once at Quinlan, a brief nod. “You held the rail.”

Quinlan didn’t answer. He kept his eyes on Obi-Wan until the current eased and the clench in Obi-Wan’s hands unwound into aftershock.

Jango stepped over, looked down, and shook his head; disappointed. “Secure him.”

Obi-Wan wished he hadn’t bargained. Wished he’d just cut and been done. Too late now. He was alive, and he would have to live with the consequences.

The arc-net clicked off and peeled back. Hard, gloved hands drove him into the stone. He made one last, frantic scramble - wrenching up and forward - but the mesh still wrapped his legs. He got half a metre before more hands hit him, shoving him face-down, wrenching his arms high between his shoulders.

“Stop resisting,” Jango said, voice hard.

They lifted him by the upper arms while the net came free. Household guards now: efficient, distant. Harness first. Forearms wrapped. Hands crossed to his sternum, as if in prayer. A strap locked across his chest. A short tether cinched his ankles. At the edge of his vision, Mij’s gloved knuckles hovered; the bandage at Obi-Wan’s neck stung like a rebuke.

“Superficial,” Mij reported. “Seal.”

Quinlan stood three metres off. “Name.”

“Obi-Wan.” It landed just above a whisper.

“Place.”

“Sundari.”

“Direct.”

There wasn't a word for it. Down didn't cover it. Back wasn't true either. He shut his eyes. "*Help me… please* Quin*, you have to help me*."

Quinlan looked away. "I have," he said, cold.

Obi-Wan had never heard that tone from him. Not directed at him. The dissonance hit like a ship riding a storm, deck rolling underfoot, sudden, sick, sinking.

He'd believed there was a door somewhere outside. That he could outrun a future with a blade and blood if he had to.

He'd been wrong. He'd been hopeful.

He'd stayed the blade and lost his last clean way out. Lost any chance of peace.

Jango stopped in front of him. Not triumphant—darker than that. Lips tight, eyes flat.

"Medical," he said. "Then introduce him to the contemplation cell."

He turned on his heel and was already striding inside.

"Logged," Vexa answered, crisp. Mij moved ahead of them, tense and swift. The harness cinched. His arms held firmly, the guards' boots sounded loud on the stone ground. The word contemplation tolled in his head with every step. Despite the name, he knew he wasn't going to like it.

Not long enough ago…

They were pinned. Blasterfire stitched the ground so tight it sounded like rain on a tin roof. The burnt-out IFT-X they'd crawled behind was still warm, a stink of scorched durasteel and melted plastoid coming off the hull in greasy waves. Grit chewed Obi-Wan's knees each time he shifted to keep Cody from sliding. His palms were slick with blood and sweat, and his vision tunnelled and widened in turns, shock breaking the edge of his focus.

Cody had taken the hit mid-pivot, protecting Obi-Wan, a lateral cut under the plates at his right flank where the seams met; ugly luck and a droid with a steady hand. Armor blackened; medical foam already exhausted Obi-Wan didn't have what he needed; the edge of the wound bubbled red with each shallow inhale. Obi-Wan had a pressure dressing jammed in and two fingers of the Force pressed against the bright arterial line beneath, clamping, clamping, clamping. He could hold a starfighter on a cliff without breaking a sweet; he could barely keep this one vessel from spilling Cody out onto the dust.

"Easy," he murmured, and didn't know who he was talking to. "Easy, Cody. I've got you."

“Sir…” Cody’s voice rasped through a helmet half-crazed with carbon scoring. “Recommend you… fall… back…”

“That’s what we’re doing,” Obi-Wan lied gently, because there was nowhere left to go. They’d fallen back twice already, the rest of the platoon peeled off and swallowed by the valley’s relentless teeth. Above the wreck, a spider droid clanked past, shadow sliding over their cover; farther downslope, an E-Web chattered with pitiless rhythm. Somewhere to the east, Dooku’s vulture droids screamed like knives.

His comm was a wash of static and dead channels, no one was left. He shut it off. Saving Cody was the only mission left now.

He bled another breath into the Force, slow and deliberate, and the world tilted. For a heartbeat he wasn’t behind a tank at all; he was underwater, and the light was wrong. When he blinked back, everything had sharpened, the dust motes, the rip in Cody’s pauldron, the way his own hands shook.

Low overhead: the flat, predatory growl of a sublight engine on a shallow pass. He didn’t look up. If it was Separatist, it would kill them. If it wasn’t, it might still.

Jetpacks answered the sky.

The pattern, four hard descents, one hovering overwatch… wasn’t GAR. It was older, meaner, drilled into history and bone: Mandalorian. The wreck shuddered as a body hit hard on the other side, metal boots biting scorched plate. A wrist rocket howled left; the E-Web choked off mid-spool. On the right, something hissed and screamed, a flamer on droid-grade lubricant, and the spider’s shadow staggered, toppled, died with a hydraulic groan.

“Need help?” said a familiar voice over the halo of heat.

Obi-Wan looked up into a T-visor reflecting him small. The weight he’d been holding slipped at once to the only place it could go. “Save him,” he managed, raw around the edges. “Please.”

“Got him,” Jango said, the flippancy gone in a breath.

He slid in, all efficiency. One gauntlet replaced Obi-Wan’s hands on the dressing, pressure perfect; the other popped a field-kit on his hip with practiced shorthand. “Pulse?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Rapid,” Obi-Wan said, but the word came from very far away.

Jango had already found it. “I know,” he said, almost conversational, and keyed a hypo into the gap in Cody’s plates, vasoconstrictor first, then a micro-dose of analgesic that wouldn’t drop his pressure.

“Hold him for me,” Obi-Wan told the Force. He couldn’t hold Cody any longer and let go, dizzy, heavy, weak.

Jango sprayed a sealant that flashed white where it met blood and locked down the worst of it with a band of combat-wrap that bit into plastoid.

“Boba,” he snapped into his com, “paint me a lane to the LZ. Slave One thirty meters, belly-down, ramp hot. No strays close.”

“Copy,” crackled a younger voice, too calm, up in the clouds. “Lane painted. You got thirty seconds before the vults come back around.”

“Plenty.” Jango slid Cody’s arm over his shoulder and stood, taking most of the weight as if the man were a child. “Up, General.”

Obi-Wan’s body obeyed on reflex and then the black rose and took him, quiet and complete, the last thing he saw, the gleam of beskar under smoke.

He dreamed of being lifted, of boots pounding a cleared path, of the low thunder of cannons muffled by Slave I’s hull. Of hands that were careful without being kind, that sealed edges and buckled straps. Jango’s voice at his ear that said, “I’ve got you.” Before turning to someone else “Cody?” Jango asked.

“He’ll live sir.” An unfamiliar voice said.

“Thanks Mij. That was too close.”

Obi-Wan drifted off again.

When he came back, Cody was foamed and banded and breathing, Slave I’s medbay lighting him in cool blue. Jango stood at the foot of the stretcher, helmet hooked at his hip, eyes blown wide.

“You’ll owe me for this one,” he said, voice amused, smile lopsided, comforting somehow.

“Of course, I wouldn’t expect anything else.” Obi-Wan replied. And for a moment he let the memory of their kiss wander into his memory. He pushed it away, that was a road he could never take.

A river runs, peace-heavy, slow;
it carries hope,
it erases scars,
it unthreads pain,
it brings us home.
A river runs:
its name is death.

Chapter End Notes

Please inform me of any typos. I prefer to fix mistakes than leave them. Thanks guys.

Chapter end credits song because why not...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZ5SI6n1Ljs&list=RDsZ5SI6n1Ljs&start_radio=1

Chapter 32: Darkness Is Light

“Roll it back to Service Junction Three,” Vexa said. The meeting was taking place just hours after the incident had been contained.

Ren scrubbed to the angle. Grainy corridor, a staffer’s cart, Obi-Wan seated just so.

“Pause,” Jango said. “Where did the blade come from.”

Ren split the screen: feeds from Medical four days prior. Mij’s tray upending, a blur of fingers. Zoom. A scalpel head vanishing against a cuff.

“Scalpel head Y-46, ferromagnetic,” Ren said. “Missing since the medical disturbance. Inventory assumed miscount during the red event. It wasn’t.”

Mij’s jaw pulled tight. “That’s on my team. We’ll switch to tethered heads, color-coded count in/out, magnet bars under trays, and live inventory pings every time a head leaves a slot.”

“Logged,” Vexa said.

“Where was it stored,” Jango asked.

Ren cut to the fresher. Thermal bloom overlays, time-stamped. “Adhered under the sink line to a ferrous pipe. Daily sweeps are tuned for cavities and plating, not for small magnetic mass in a field of metal.”

Cody considered. “I’ll retask sweeps. Add magnetometers and ferrous pattern deltas, not just absolute mass. Change sweep cadence and path so he can’t map the rhythm.”

“Logged,” Vexa said. “Also: staff lanyard.”

Ren rolled forward to the trolley pass. Then to the Badge taken and back again.

“Negligence?” Jango asked.

“Negative,” Cody said. “Textile lanyard, severed. We’ll move to retractable reels anchored inside the tunic with biometric proximity. No free dangles within arm’s reach.”

“Logged.”

“Play,” Jango said.

They watched it: the pivot, the cart to shin, ankle, knee, the wedge into the door track, the slip.

“Door logic?” Jango asked.

“Legacy safety re-open on obstruction,” Ren said. “We’ll add a ‘service obstruction’ profile that re-opens only five centimetres and triggers local lockout with alarm.”

“Logged,” Vexa said. “Now the reader.”

The clip showed a red flash, Obi-Wan knifing the faceplate off the reader, bridging two wires with the metal tip.

“Fieldcraft,” Cody said, flat. “He didn’t know the board, he guessed the bridge pair off colour and layout… intuitive even without the force.”

“Don’t admire it,” Jango said “that skill almost cost him his life.”

“I admire it, I’ve been saved by his skills many times.” Cody said. “And then I learnt from it.”

Jango nodded allowing it.

“Replace all exposed reader plates with sealed units,” Vexa said. “Sensors set to trigger a lockdown when tampered with.”

“Logged.”

They let the run play to the checkpoint where Obi-Wan breezed past on Vexa’s name.

“Free pass,” Jango said without looking at her.

“Correct,” Vexa admitted. “My name has become a master key. This has become a weak point in security despite discouragement.” She shook her head in disappointment “ Guards request a rotating phrase from their slate. No exceptions.”

Ren pulled up a list. “Phrases rotate daily. Logged. Names are never a free pass.”

“Dock Two,” Jango said.

Quinlan entering. The three-meter rail. The disarm: clean, quick, merciless.

“I authorized hands-on for blade control only,” Vexa said. “Vos rode the rail appropriately.”

“He did,” Jango agreed, voice unreadable. “He also emboldened the attempt.”

“Also true,” Vexa said. “Risk trade-off favoured survival over theatrics. He got the knife. Kenobi was subdued unharmed. Outcome acceptable.”

Jango nodded once. “Outcome acceptable.”

They look over the logs approving the shuttle next.

“He demanded it,” Vexa said. “Agreeing created a funnel: Dock Two is for off world visitors, extra security, ceiling arcs, and two shutters. A service speeder in a utility bay would have

offered more exits whereas this led to simpler containment.” She flipped through the files “this also allowed us to use our senatorial shuttle to force de-escalation.”

Jango’s mouth tipped a millimetre “you warned him.”

“Yes,” Vexa said. “I warned him. He complied with point-down. That kept alternative methods in reserve.”

“Logged,” Ren said.

Mij brought up a vitals ribbon along the holo’s bottom edge: heart-rates twin and ragged, oxygen steady enough, cortisol spiking.

“Neck wound superficial,” he said. “Sealant placed. No significant blood loss. He stayed within green the whole window after capture.”

“Sedation?” Jango asked.

“Not given,” Mij said. “I kept red-only per standing order.”

“Maintain,” Jango said. “I want him present for consequences.”

Silence settled, for a few moments as they each sat with the consequences for themselves.

“Quinlan?” Jango broke the silence “Ventress has become too lenient on him, I’m concerned about his loyalties.”

Vexa didn’t look at him. “He remains useful as a rail and as a tool. We change placements, however, cancel visitation for now, his presence will only escalate behaviour.”

“Done,” Jango said. “We will need to work out an appropriate replacement second visitor. Long-term; isolation is not my goal.”

“I will create a list of candidates.” Vexa said again typing on her slate.

“He believed he could deny what he is. He has not accepted the truth of the Manda,” the Armorer said softly, seemingly out of nowhere, the first words she’d offered. Clearly no one had expected it, but all stopped and listened when she spoke.

“That is the important data, more than the how. He saw a way out and believed he could use it. We must remove the belief. He must accept his place amongst us.” She leaned in and inclined her head “now is not the time for weakness.”

Jango considered her “Myles has confirmed that rumours are beginning to spread. Clan leaders are leaking information to force my hand. Obi-Wan is not ready, unfortunately we no longer have the luxury of waiting.”

The Armorer considered “we need to proceed with the ritual soon.”

Jango swallowed, nodded “I want it tested first, if it doesn’t work…”

The Armorer raised her hand and Jango fell silent “If he fails the test then you will do your duty.” She considered her next words carefully “However, I would not fear that outcome. The Manda has spoken to us. You have called on the Manda’s light. He is what we believe him to be.”

“Even so, I will have it tested first. If it does not work, I will not risk it at the living waters. I won’t destabilize the empire, and I will not execute him. I will not lose him.”

The armorer bowed her head in acknowledgement “very well Mand’alor.”

Obi-Wan stayed bound through Mij’s quick check and barely noticed. Mij was far away; the world was far away. He wondered, absurdly, if he had died out there. Hope had done it; letting himself believe he might succeed. It had gutted him clean. He wasn’t sure a man could live after that.

Still bound, he was escorted by Cody and his men back to the household. No one spoke. They cleared security, slid past the education annex without slowing, and turned down a corridor he had never seen. He didn’t catalogue it. Curiosity had stopped being useful.

They halted at a reinforced door. Bolts cycled for a full thirty seconds. Inside: an empty metal cube. A vent. A floor drain in the corner for waste and nothing else.

They took him in. Cody himself removed the restraints. Slow, careful; leaving the chest harness. The gentleness was real but in stuck contrast to the anger tight along Cody’s jaw. Everyone was angry with him. He couldn’t make himself care.

Cody stepped back. “This is the contemplation cell. You will be here three days. Three meals a day. You will eat and drink all of it. You will obey any order given without hesitation. Failure to comply extends the term.”

“Torture,” Obi-Wan said, mild as ash. “I wondered what was next.”

Cody didn’t answer. He walked out. The door closed with a hydraulic grind and a final, heavy clang.

Darkness fell and it was total. No shape in the dark, no hint of a wall. He lifted a hand and might as well have been reaching into his own skull. Alone. Even from himself.

Time stretched until it broke. When the lights hit, they hit hard, white pain. He turned his face, covered his eyes. A tray slid through a low slot; a speaker clicked.

“Meal. Eat it all. Ten minutes. Counting.”

He forced his eyes open in slits. Soup, lukewarm. Water, metallic. He drank both fast enough to choke, set bowl and cup back on the tray.

“Replace receptacles. Back wall.”

He obeyed and walked backward until cold met his shoulders. The light cut. Afterimages kept him company for a minute, pink shapes that thinned and went. Then the dark was absolute again, as if it had never been otherwise, as if it would never be anything else.

His brain reached. Needing. Wanting. Hungry for substance that wasn’t food. He hummed. Rubbed both hands over his face. Yanked a strand of hair to worry between his fingers. Not enough. None of it enough. The hunger sharpened into panic.

He pictured the Temple: a youngling, friends in the training yard. No knowledge of the terrible future. So naïve. He wished he still was. Naivety was a gift too rarely appreciated.

He found himself talking to them; the childhood voices answered out of memory. Even Quin: how he had been, not what time had made him.

“Obi-Wan,” said a voice that shouldn’t be here.

He turned toward it. Out of the dark, Qui-Gon stepped.

“You’ve stopped reaching outward,” his master said, as if they were walking the halls between lessons. “You’re beginning to look inward. That is good.”

Obi-Wan shut his eyes against a darkness he couldn’t shut out. “You’re not here,” he said. His throat hurt. “I can’t feel the Force.”

“The Force is in all living things,” Qui-Gon said mildly. “You know this. Is it so hard to believe that I am here?”

“You died,” Obi-Wan said. “You are one with the Force.” His voice broke on the truth. He had thought he had lost enough for one man. He had not known the extent of loss.

“And yet here I am speaking with you,” Qui-Gon answered gently, lowering himself to sit beside Obi-Wan, shoulder to shoulder against the wall. “Sentient; and one with the Force.”

Obi-Wan lifted a hand and touched the collar band in the dark. “The suppressor.”

Qui-Gon’s smile felt like warmth remembered. “We once had a training bond. Enough of it lives in you that we remain connected. I am not coming to you from the currents you are cut off from. I am coming along the line we tied long ago. It can bypass the limits of what we thought we understood.”

“Is that all?”

“It took practice even in this… condition.” A faint humor, still Qui-Gon’s. “Now I have the trick of it. As long as you do not reach outward, only sit with what is already within you, there is nothing to stop us speaking.”

Obi-Wan laughed once, a broken thing. “Words won’t change what he plans to do.”

“No,” Qui-Gon said. “But they change what you will do.” A pause. “Meditate with me.”

He obeyed because he always had. In. One, two, three…

“You are not the dark,” Qui-Gon said. “You are the one noticing it.”

“Semantics.”

“Positioning,” Qui-Gon corrected. “When you cannot move your body, move your attention. When you cannot leave the room, leave the moment.”

Obi-Wan pressed the back of his head to the wall until it hurt. “He will make me-” The word wouldn’t come. He swallowed it. “He will take.”

“Obedience under duress is not consent,” Qui-Gon said, voice as even as the years in the training salles. “He wants your surrender. That is harder to take. Obedience and surrender are different things.”

“I’m so tired,” Obi-Wan whispered.

“Then be tired,” Qui-Gon said. “He has done you great harm. He will keep doing you great harm. What you need to regain is the power to say no.”

He breathed until the ache in his chest loosened by a thread. The room stayed a box. He stayed alone. But the panic softened. This was a pain he could bear.

“Good.” Qui-Gon’s presence thinned like a tide going out. “I won’t go.”

“Don’t,” Obi-Wan said, hating the plea in it.

“I don’t. It is you who leaves me.”

The light hit without warning. He flinched; the tray slid in. “Meal. Eat it all. Ten minutes. Counting.”

He ate because the voice would extend his sentence if he didn’t. He set the bowl and cup back.

“Replace receptacles. Back wall.”

He returned to the wall. The light died.

“Again,” Qui-Gon said from the dark.

Obi-Wan breathed. And when his hands began to shake, he kept them flat to the floor and did not reach for anything that wasn’t already his. He sank into meditation and out of the room.

“Before I died, I learned a way to preserve one’s consciousness beyond the limits of flesh and blood.”

Obi-Wan considered. “You were always pushing boundaries.”

“Be glad that I did, Padawan. Or I would not be here to guide you now.”

Chapter 33: Choice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maul didn't slow; he was not a being who liked to dally. He cut through the large glass doors of Research and went straight to the Mand'alor, who was already there waiting, speaking low to an analyst note-taker.

With a single glance Maul's way, Jango dismissed the analyst with a flick of his fingers. She bowed her head, nodded at Maul as she strode past him; off to do whatever the boring brains of such a place did, he supposed. He'd had many of the same at his last assignment. They actually found the quiet of thought *invigorating*.

Jango approached him. "Organa has taken his post with enthusiasm, I take it?" Straight to business.

Maul inclined his head. "He despises it. He will perform regardless. He has too much to lose."

"Hmmm. And the targets?"

"Organa's wife has spirit," Maul said, a hint of amusement in the words, "but she could do nothing. I'll have her transferred to Integration."

Jango nodded. "Good. That will keep Organa on track."

"The twins were also present, though they tried to hide them." Maul's lips curved, small and sharp. "We have them onboard, awaiting your instructions."

"Put them with the other foundlings for now. Bar adoption." Jango's gaze went distant for a heartbeat, calculating. "Skywalker will probably earn them back in time. His progress is going well."

"An act?" Maul asked.

"Only time will tell." Jango's focus snapped back. "Your last transmission said you failed to locate Senator Amidala?"

Maul's expression cooled. "Correct. The Queen was there. The children were there. Amidala was not. Local records claim she left the system months ago."

"You believe them?" Jango asked.

"I believe they were too afraid not to," Maul said. "Their fear tasted… honest. Someone moved her before my arrival. Someone with clearance and resources."

"Organa?" Jango suggested.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” Maul’s eyes glinted. “There are routes he doesn’t have access to. And allies we have not yet unmasked.”

Jango hummed, low and considering. “Any trace? Traffic spikes. Off-world jumps. Shadow accounts.”

“I left probes in all the usual currents,” Maul said, considering. “If she surfaces, we’ll know. But I doubt she will remain quiet. She never has.”

Jango’s mouth tightened. “She’s still a symbol in the Core. I want that accounted for. Prioritise: confirmation of life or death. Until then, we assume she’s in play.”

Maul inclined his head. “Understood.”

“For now, the twins and Organa’s queen are leverage enough.” Jango’s voice went flat. “Organa will stay in line. Skywalker will keep walking our path. And when Amidala shows herself…”

Maul’s smile turned thin and anticipatory. “We’ll be ready.”

Jango nodded once, already turning toward the deeper labs. “Good work. See to the transfer orders. I want the children processed as foundlings before the next cycle.”

Maul bowed his head a fraction. “As you command, Mand’alor.”

“Good.” Jango held out a palm. “The data?”

Maul unlatched a black courier satchel at his belt and placed a cube in Jango’s hand. Security glyphs winked like cold stars across the steel.

“So much trouble for something so small,” Jango said, turning it once. His gaze lifted. “Your report.”

“The only access passcode resolves to Grand Master Yoda.” Maul’s mouth edged toward a smile that wasn’t kind. “He’s been lying to you.”

Jango’s stare sharpened, all planes and angles.

“Would you like me to question him?” Maul offered.

“No,” Jango said. “Don’t waste your time. I have another use for him. My Runi’oyay’dinuir needs a lesson.”

Maul hummed, almost pleased. “I could handle Yoda as I handled Satine. A precise reminder of place.”

“Not this time.” Jango clapped Maul’s arm; approval “A public execution sends the message I require; to the scattered Jetii, and to my Runi’oyay’dinuir both.”

Maul’s eyes sparked. “What did he do now?”

“Tried to escape by holding his own life hostage.”

A low laugh. “He does still surprise, doesn’t he? I warned you: he isn’t a standard Jedi. He’s a little voorpak; soft to look at, warm to touch, but this one has poison on his teeth, and he’s always hungry.”

Jango’s mouth twitched. “Is that the Sith version of ‘this tooka has claws’?”

“No,” Maul said, amused. “Everyone already knows a tooka has claws.”

Jango hummed and nodded his agreement, closed his fist around the cube, and headed for his slicing team.

The Kel Dor slicer, all steady hands and a habit of triple-checking everything, straightened as Jango entered, Myles a step behind him.

“Mand’alor,” she said. “We’re ready to run the basic decrypt. According to the report from our Coruscant team, the vault key is layered; Republic military encryption over Jedi cipher.”

Jango set the cube in the reader cradle. Glyphs pulsed, then settled into a steady amber glow.

“So Maul had the right target,” he said, folding his arms. “What’s stored?”

“We’re still behind the shields,” the slicer said. “Index only. It references redacted Archive branches, medical classifications, a set of restricted cultural files, and a sealed Palpatine dossier. Access denied without live authorisation.”

“Live,” Jango repeated. “Not a copied key.”

“Yes, Mand’alor.” Her mask valves hissed thoughtfully. “Keyed to a specific brainwave pattern. No imprint, no bypass. Given enough time, we might brute-force the outer layer in years, maybe decades. He had access to the best slicers in the galaxy; it was designed to resist exactly this. With his cooperation, we could have it in under an hour.”

Jango watched the locked text scroll by: fragmentary tags slipping through the index—*Stewjon. Mandalore. Surveillance protocols. Temple asset. Palpatine, Year One of the war.* An exceptionally large file only called ‘*Shadow file’.* Threads that might matter: to his Empire, to his Runi’oyay’dinuir, to all the fault lines he was still shoring up.

His research teams needed this. It might fill in the blanks they were still guessing at.

“You have two days,” Jango said at last, to Myles as much as to the slicer. “If he cooperates, he earns a stay of execution, and we keep using his mind. If he refuses…” He watched the cube’s glow, voice flattening. “Then I’ll use his death instead.”

Myles nodded once. “Understood, Mand’alor.”

“Good.” Jango turned away. “Bring Yoda to an interview room. Make sure he knows exactly what’s at stake.”

They brought Yoda in. He looked small and helpless between the guards in full beskar’gam. Though they all knew that, without the suppressor, he was anything but.

Waiting at the table was a third Mandalorian with a datapad. Without the force Yoda had to be lifted into the waiting seat. the soft clink of manacles on stretched stubby arms as they fixed his wrists to a discreet ring on the table. It had been especially modified to fit the small green creature even before Order 66.

The interview room was windowless, lit a shade too bright, walls a neutral grey. A carafe of water on the table. Two chairs. No obvious restraints beyond the ring.

Myles stood waiting, bare-headed, helmet on the table. He ignored the Mandalorian using the datapad.

On the other side of a one-way holo-screed, Jango watched from the observation room, arms folded, the live feed floating in miniature above the Kel Dor slicer’s console.

“Failed integrator Yoda,” Myles said, as the door sealed behind the guards.

Yoda’s ears twitched. “Failed you say? … failure a matter of perspective it is,” he replied, calm as if this were a Council briefing. “Old, I am. Prisoner, I am. Failure? Hmmm perhaps projection this is?”

Myles inclined his head but decided to ignore the creatures attempts at arguing “failed integrator Yoda.” He rested his fingertips lightly on the table. “We have something that belongs to you.”

He set the cube in the centre of the table. It caught the room’s light and answered with its own glyphs pulsing faintly, then settling back to amber when they didn’t recognize him.

Yoda’s gaze dipped to it, then back to Myles.

“Data cube,” Myles said. “Republic military encryption overlaid on a Jedi cipher. Access tied to a single biometric and cognitive pattern.” A small, almost apologetic smile. “Yours.”

Nothing in Yoda’s face changed, but his ears tipped forward a fraction. “Careful, the Order was,” he said, “with dangerous knowledge.”

“Careful,” Myles agreed, “and selective.” He moved back to the wall and leaned back in a relaxed pose. “Our teams have indexed the shell only. The payload includes redacted Archive

branches, medical classifications, restricted cultural files, and a sealed Palpatine dossier from early in the war." He let that hang a beat. "Our Mand'alor would like to know why that was hidden."

Yoda's eyes flicked, once, to the data cube, then returned to Myles. "Know much, we did," he said at last. "Too much, perhaps. Blind, we were, and slow to see. Many died for that. My fault, some part of it is." He lifted his head, old eyes clear. "Two evils. How to choose hmmm?"

"We all make choices; we all have to live with them. We all suffer the consequences for them," Myles said gently. "You stood before the republic, before my people, while your Chancellor was carving the galaxy into pieces. There is concern that you knew more than you admitted."

"In the dark, we walked," Yoda said. "Our failure, that is. Your leader, use that he did."

"True," Myles allowed. "For the greater good. To prevent an empire of Sith… something you agreed to help us with. We spared the younglings as you negotiated. But you did not hold to your part of the deal."

In the observation room, Jango's mouth thinned. He said nothing.

Myles went on, still in that courteous, patient tone. "Here is the situation. That cube contains information that affects Mandalore's security, and the safety of those under our protection." A slight emphasis on our; he knew Jango would hear it. "Including, Obi-Wan Kenobi, he was of your lineage I believe?"

Yoda's ears tilted again, very slightly. "For him, worry you do," he said.

"The Mand'alor does," Myles said. "Palpatine used clones designed on Mandalorian patterns. He tampered with their minds. He laid contingencies across the Order and the Senate that we are still uncovering."

He paused and stood straight and walked over to a mounted holoprojector. It came to life and brought up some recent intel from Palpatine's private residence.

"data was recovered as you already know. However, we have reason to believe some of those threads intersect with Obi-Wan Kenobi. With Stewjon. With Mandalore." He nodded toward the cube. "With your help, we can open this. Perhaps the last remnants of the Sith can be hunted down with the help of the intel in that cube. Without your help… years, if ever."

"Open this data cube, you wish, to stabilise the galaxy," he said. "To protect, you say. To control, you mean. Dangerous, such knowledge is, in one hand."

"In one hand it already was," Myles said, still soft. "Yours. We only want to cut the last strings of the Sith from the galaxy once and for all."

"And no new strings, tie, you will?" Yoda asked, voice mild as rain.

Myles didn't answer that directly. "The offer is simple, Master Yoda. Cooperate, and you will live out your remaining years in relative comfort. Light. Books. Even students, in time you may have an advisory role to our Mand'alor. Refuse, and your usefulness ends here."

"Useful." Yoda repeated as if considering. "To be useful, wish you me to be. To the Mand'alor. To his Empire. To his…" his ears twitched, "…Runi'oyay'dinuir."

Myles kept his face bland. "He cares for Kenobi," he said. "That is not in dispute."

"Love him, he does." Again, not a question. "Fear, also, does he."

Myles let that pass. "This is not a moral hearing, Master Yoda. It's a practical one. The Mand'alor wants to protect his people. He believes this data will help him do that. You have a choice: give us the key, or do not."

"Choice, yes." Yoda nodded, small and slow. "Choose, I do."

He fell quiet. The room hummed. Behind the holo-screed, Jango's fingers flexed once on folded arms.

Finally, Yoda looked up and met Myles' eyes. There was no defiance there, only worn-out resolve. "No."

"Our Mand'alor is prepared to offer…"

"No," Yoda repeated, more gently. "Open this cube, you might, in time. Break me, you will not. One last lesson, this is."

Myles breathed out through his nose. "You do understand this ends with your execution."

"Understand, I do." Yoda's ears drooped, but his voice stayed steady. "Die, must we all. Choose when, I cannot. Choose how, perhaps." He glanced at the cube. "Better, it is, to die with secrets that protect, than live to see them used to harm."

Myles studied him. "You think what's on here can only do harm?"

"Think, I do, that in hands that grasp so tightly, heal, it will not," Yoda said. His gaze flicked once toward the ceiling, toward the distant palace. "Already, too tight, your Mand'alor holds. Already, too much, he has taken."

"Empires don't survive by letting their enemies live," Myles said quietly. He didn't know if he was quoting Jango or himself.

"And homes, become they do not," Yoda answered. "Burned ground, leave they behind when fall, they do."

"Very well," Myles said at last. He collected the cube. "I will report your choice."

Yoda dipped his head. "Report also, you may, that some things, take from us, he cannot."

Myles paused at the door. “Such as?”

Yoda smiled, small and tired and maddeningly serene. “Hope…. decide we all do, when to lay this down.”

“Death is the end of hope.” Myles said and left.

The door sealed between them.

Myles stepped into the observation room, the light cooler here, the air humming with equipment. He set the cube on the console rail, respectfully on Jango’s side of the line.

“You heard,” Myles said.

Jango didn’t look away from the frozen last frame of the interview feed; Yoda, wrists chained, gaze steady. “He refused,” Jango said, flat.

“Yes,” Myles confirmed. “He will not cooperate. He knows it means his death.”

“For the sake of a crypt,” Jango muttered.

“For the sake of who comes after him,” Myles said quietly. “He framed it that way.”

Silence beat once, twice.

“So be it,” Jango said. “Public execution. I want the announcement drafted within the hour.”

Myles inclined his head, no argument, no approval. “As you command, Mand’alor.”

“Log that the Kel Dor is to continue working the cube,” Jango said. “We assume we’ll crack it eventually. But we proceed without it for now. We don’t wait.”

“Logged,” Myles said.

Jango stayed a moment longer, watching the blanked-out screen where Yoda’s image had been, the cube cold in his palm.

Such a waste, a part of him thought.

Chapter End Notes

Hope this wasn't too boring bit of an info dump I know...

Chapter 34: Suffering

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys. I am planning on replying to all your comments. Had a hard few weeks and I've become a bit communication deficient. I should be back to my usual self soon... thank you all for your comments, even when I'm like this they make my day!

During the first year of the war…

Yoda sat in his council chair, eyes lightly closed. His breathing was calm. His mind was not.

“Only you can choose,” Qui-Gon said.

He had walked straight into Yoda’s meditation and sat beside him on nothing; cross-legged in the air considering. He did it with the confidence of a man who believed that inhabiting another’s mind was his right. Yoda supposed, in a way, it was Qui-Gon’s world now. By necessity and loss… Yoda had allowed this.

The conversation that followed would haunt him for the rest of his life.

It would end like everyone’s story: in death - his death. That was all right. Death was part of life, and he was ready to join the Force when it came. But first, there was training he needed to complete. There were things Qui-Gon had to teach him.

And there was a choice to make.

Who would rule the galaxy after the inevitable fall of the Republic and the Jedi? What gave him the right to make such a choice? Nothing. But he had to let the choice settle on him, let the Force guide him now. Either way the outcome would be… loss. They were already losing

themselves. But standing in the halls with younglings running off to class, and knights catching up with friends on corners and a feeling of peace… that would die here. The Temple would be a tomb. All that was left was choosing the lesser of two evils.

Qui-Gon had made it clear; choosing the Republic meant choosing annihilation. *They* were coming one way or another, and the Republic would fail to stop them.

They both already knew which way Yoda would go, but still he tried, because he could not help it. His mind whirled with possibilities, hunting at the back of his thoughts for some third way, some untouched path…

“There is no third option that ends with any remnant of the galaxy surviving as we know it,” Qui-Gon said at last. “I have searched all outcomes. I have wandered through a thousand timelines looking.” He sighed, shaking his head. “I am truly sorry, old friend.”

Yoda’s ears drooped. “If choose I must,” he murmured, “then the future, choose I will. The younglings, the future are. Live, they must.”

Qui-Gon’s gaze softened. “If you choose that route, Obi-Wan’s future is… bleak.” He spoke the name like a pressure on the air. “In many ways, he is the best of us. But if he comes into play, he will no longer be a Jedi. His power will change many things. And the greed for that power will…” Qui-Gon’s mouth tightened. “He will suffer more than anyone should bear.”

Yoda closed his eyes, feeling the shape of that sorrow waiting ahead of him. “Protected him we have, as long as possible.” His ears dropped, and he shook his head slowly.

Qui-Gon nodded, then added, “If it eases your guilt, know that either way he would suffer. It is simply a choice of the type of suffering.”

“Ease it, it does not.”

Qui-Gon considered Yoda with new understanding. “Obi-Wan has always made it easy to form an attachment to him. There is a certain light he carries… all Force-sensitives who encounter him have a strong reaction, one way or another.”

Yoda did not argue the point. “Allow this Clone War to continue, we will. Secretly assist Fett, we will.”

Qui-Gon nodded, his eyes sad. He clasped Yoda’s shoulder. “We will be there for Obi-Wan when he is ready.”

“For the good of all, suffer he will,” Yoda said quietly. “Failed him, we have.”

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and fell back into meditation inside himself. He found Qui-Gon there waiting for him. He had managed to form a corporeal version of himself in the Force held within.

He could interact with that world; connect with the Force there. He’d been learning how to meditate there. He was beginning to learn how to release his feelings into the inner Force… though it was different than giving them up to the outer Force.

This time, as he approached, Qui-Gon looked troubled. “Obi-Wan, I must warn you.” He considered his next words. “I can’t directly tell you what is going to happen. It would have a negative effect on the future. Even the smallest of changes can lead to disaster. However, I believe I can tell you this much.”

He looked off into the distance. “They will come for you again soon, and when they do, you will suffer a loss. However, I want you to remember: this is not your loss, and you are not responsible for it.”

Obi-Wan was jolted suddenly out of his mind by a terrible light. He covered his face with his forearm, turning from the glare pouring in through the now-open door.

“On your feet, Obi-Wan.” Cody’s voice, impossibly loud.

He curled tighter from the bright, bladed air.

“Obi-Wan, you can stand under your own power, or you can be lifted. Which do you choose?”

“You’re distracting me. Go away,” he rasped.

Boots. Gloves on his arms. No gentle lie today it would seem. The world came in teeth-first; light too sharp, tiles too hard, beskar too loud. They hauled him upright and dragged him into the corridor. Cody waited, a fixed point in the glare.

“Good,” Cody said, and turned on his heel.

Walking was too much; too much light, too much sound, too much body. He squinted against the stab of it, stumbled, steadied by hands that didn’t bother to be gentle.

Security was heavier than he’d ever seen. He thought that was funny, he felt strange in his own mind. Either way when he let out a huff of a laugh Cody looked at him sharply. “There is nothing funny about this situation Obi-Wan.”

They took the medical turn… then didn’t. A lift down. Doors opened on twelve more guards and Ventress, pale and knife-sure in the wash of fluorescents. Overkill for a Force-suppressed prisoner. Overwhelming to a raw nervous system.

A long hall. An open door. They marched him toward the light.

Jango arrived with the timing of a cue line.

“Mand’alor,” Obi-Wan said, and bowed from the tether of two fists at his arms.

Jango looked him over; the crease at his mouth betrayed what the rest of his face didn’t. Obi-Wan smelled of the cell, sour sweat and the blind aim of a drain. He let the awareness sit and said nothing.

“Your punishment for endangering yourself and deserting your responsibilities and people is complete,” Jango said voice for the room, the cameras, the record.

Obi-Wan raised a brow.

“However, the sentence for threatening the life of the Mand’alor’s Runi’oyay’dinuir is death.”

“Proceed,” Obi-Wan said, flat, a serene smile on his face. A Jedi kriff-you; they both knew it. “I am more that content to desist being your play-thing.”

“I would never threaten your life,” Jango returned, cold. “But when your life is threatened. Someone pays. This is on you.”

The blade found the space under the rib anyway. Obi-Wan stepped without choosing; the guards checked him short. “Don’t.”

“Let this be a lesson, my Runi’oyay’dinuir.” Jango came closer until the grip on Obi-Wan’s arms kept him from the instinctive retreat. “You will never threaten your life again. If you decide your freedom is worth more than your life; if you do this again, I will execute two more.” His eyes searched Obi-Wan’s face, narrowed. “Do you understand me?”

Obi-Wan looked down to break the stare. “Who?”

A gloved hand took his chin, lifted. “I created an Empire to protect you. I watched good men die. I destroyed the Jedi.” The hand fell; whatever quiet that touch lent, vanished. “I built you a home. I gave you the best of everything. You are my future and my life, and I will not let anyone take you from me; including you.” He turned, voice hardening to command. “Bring him.”

The sun outside was a white coin hammered flat. The platform faced a sea of helms and bare heads; banners cracked in the hot wind; chant rolled like surf “Mand’alor! Mand’alor!”

They shoved him to his knees at the edge of shadow and glare. The translator lattice on the pylons picked up Jango’s Mando’a and cast it wide between phrases.

“My people. We are a just Empire. We have shown mercy to dozens of adult Jetii prisoners. But one warlord, tried and found guilty, has rejected our help.”

Boots approached from behind the escort line. Two guards. Between them, a compact figure in binders, green head bare in the sun.

“He holds centuries of knowledge,” Obi-Wan said, low enough for Jango’s ear. “He’s useful.”

Jango’s eyebrow lifted. “Who do you suggest instead?”

Obi-Wan held his gaze. “Don’t.”

Jango returned to the crowd. “He refuses to integrate. His original sentence is now carried out. Execution.”

They fixed Yoda’s manacles to a D-ring on the platform. The old master turned his head, ears bowed, eyes clear.

“Fear leads to anger,” Yoda said. The only one listening was Obi-Wan.

The crowd roared as Jango lit the Darksaber. The blade drank the sun.

“Anger leads to hate,” Yoda went on, blinking once, calm as still water.

Jango set his feet.

“Hate leads to—”

The strike was clean. Head and body parted and rolled on separate paths across the stone.

The light thinned at the edges. Obi-Wan gagged hard; bile stung. Cody’s hand hovered at his shoulder, and he shrugged it off, once, sharp. He took a step he hadn’t meant to take and stopped because there was nowhere left to go.

A hand set, firm and proprietary, at the nape of his neck. He let it steady him.

He reached for Qui-Gon, instinctually outward…

And found only the hush of the suppressor.

He closed his eyes.

It was done. What once was would never be again.

The chant blurred to a wash. Hands reclaimed his arms; no gentling, no pretence. Prisoner. Inmate. Captive… slave.

Chapter 35: Geonosis

Chapter Notes

> Chapter 27 now has art! I am not responsible though I wish I was! it's a stunner in my opinion! Thanks to the artist for this!

Not long enough ago…

Obi-Wan had followed Fett to Geonosis. His attempt to call Anakin had ended abruptly; he'd been too distracted with worrying for his Padawan to sense the Mando coming up behind him. To be fair, beskar was notorious for being a blank spot in the Force.

Still, it stung. Waking up to Dooku's betrayal and rant had also been irritating.

"I had hoped you could be reasoned with," Dooku said. "I'm disappointed in Qui-Gon. He should have taught you better."

"I'm sure he's as disappointed in you as you are in him," Obi-Wan said, eyes moving between Dooku and Fett, who was leaning against the wall passively.

"You are fortunate that your fate was altered on this day, my grand Padawan, and that my wish is for your survival and not your destruction… for now, at least."

With Dooku's departure, Fett moved to where Obi-Wan was hanging in blue light, looking as regal as a restrained man could. Lofty, snobby, arrogant Jetti. Fett let his gaze roam over him before returning to Obi-Wan's face. At least he was beautiful.

"You should thank me, Jetti. I led you here; even let you get your message out to your fellow Jetti." He folded his arms. "Your army should be here to rescue you soon."

"Are you insinuating you're helping me?" Obi-Wan asked, incredulous.

"I am what stands between you and the destruction that'll take place in the arena."

Obi-Wan had no idea what he was talking about. "I see," he said, because appearance was half the battle in a situation like this.

Jango circled him, enjoying the view from every angle. Yes, he could handle this. If Obi-Wan was his soulbound—if he was—then who was he to disagree with the Manda?

"Are you planning to explain why you would help me?" that pretentious voice asked, and Jango felt another roll of irritation burn in his chest. He pushed it down; perhaps, in time, he'd find something he liked about the Jetti.

“Call it investment,” Jango said. “I help you and you help me.”

Obi-Wan had to stop himself from scoffing. “I see. And in this grand plan of yours, did you consider that I’ve chased you halfway across the galaxy to bring you to justice? You are responsible for several murders and the attempted assassination of a Republic senator… and I’m sure a raft of other crimes.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of an informant?” Jango asked, turning to leave. “I’ll be in touch.”

“If you truly want to help me, then prove it. Let me down.”

Jango paused and looked back. “If I let you go now, you’ll run off to help the other Jetti and most likely die. I can’t work with a dead Jetti.”

He did not turn back as Obi-Wan muttered, “Stranger things have happened.”

It was a few hours later when Obi-Wan’s attempts to break his restraints became desperate. He could hear the battle. He needed to get there—assist in any way he could. He struggled, helplessness nagging at the edges of his vision. Felt his hands shift. Felt his legs shift. Pulled and tore until finally, surprisingly, his wrists came free.

He tumbled forward, legs still attached, landing face-first on the floor. It jolted him. He hadn’t actually expected it to work. He’d had to try… but this was entirely unexpected. He lay there stunned, tasting blood in his mouth.

All he could do was get his legs free next, but whatever part of the Force he’d managed to access while suppressed had left him now. Try as he might, he couldn’t return to whatever mindset had let him break through the suppressors.

As luck would have it, that was the moment Dooku chose to come back. He took one look at Obi-Wan—ankles aloft, the rest of him sprawled on the floor—and went straight to bring up the security feed.

Obi-Wan shifted to watch as Dooku watched his fall several times, then proceeded to run diagnostics.

“I know it might be a bit of an inconvenience,” Obi-Wan said, “but I find myself in a rather uncomfortable posture. If you wouldn’t mind?”

Dooku ignored the comment. “I was watching the Jedi fall to my droids when I got a security alert. Unsurprisingly, from here. I thought perhaps it was a rescue attempt.” He paused, scornful gaze sliding over Obi-Wan. “Imagine my surprise when I find you like this.”

Obi-Wan tried to ignore the indignity of the situation. “I was also surprised to find myself like this.”

“Hmmm,” Dooku said, double-checking the controls before coming over to look at Obi-Wan curiously. “There does not appear to be a fault.”

“As interesting as this conversation is… would you mind letting me up?”

Dooku laughed. “No. I don’t think I will. But don’t worry, I’m sure someone will find you soon enough.”

He crossed to a cabinet on the other side of the room, rummaged, then returned. He yanked Obi-Wan’s arm out and stabbed him with a needle.

“I always wondered what drew so many to you,” Dooku mused. “Why Qui-Gon, even my own master Yoda, have favoured you with their attention.”

He drew blood, withdrawing the needle with clinical care. “Then, to add insult to injury, you not only survived but defeated Maul—mere moments after he killed my own Padawan; by all accounts a man with more talent than you could ever dream of equalling…”

He stood, considering the vial. “And yet you did.”

“I was there,” Obi-Wan muttered. “If you’re looking for an explanation, it’s simple: I got lucky.”

Dooku was fiddling with something else now. “That’s what I thought too at first.” He returned with some sort of scanner and raised an eyebrow at whatever it told him. “But yet again, fate has arranged for others whose focus is once again solely on you. Fett is not a man easily swayed—especially by a Jedi. Why the interest?”

“I’m charming. People like me,” Obi-Wan offered.

“And then I find you like this.” Dooku looked down at him. “I left you Force-suppressed and restrained. Care to explain that?”

Obi-Wan searched for an answer and came up with none.

“How do you do it?” Dooku asked.

“Do what?” and Obi-Wan considered he must look ignorant enough that Dooku fell silent.

“You knew them. Your friends are out there too. Dying on your orders.” Obi-Wan accused.

“Surely you are not ruled by your attachments, Knight Kenobi?” Dooku’s voice softened, mockingly. “If there is one sure thing about life, it is death.”

Obi-Wan changed the direction of the conversation again, back to himself. “Find anything interesting?” he asked eyeing his blood bound in glass.

Dooku smiled. “You should ask your Order.”

Obi-Wan gave up then. Dooku was a lost cause.

Dooku scanned him several more times, then packed his things away and considered Obi-Wan again. “I will say it again: a war is starting today. I suggest you choose not to fight in it. However, know that at any point, if you wish to explore another way, you can always come to me. I will not harm my Padawans, Padawan.”

He left, and Obi-Wan was left still bound by his ankles and sprawled on the floor.

Later, it was Anakin and Padmé who found him—because the Force had a sense of humour.

“I wondered what had happened to you, Master. We could have used your help out there.”

Anakin released him completely, and Obi-Wan gasped as the force returned to him—loss, so much loss.

Anakin wasn’t cracking a joke; he wasn’t smiling at Obi-Wan’s predicament. That was all the proof Obi-Wan needed that something terrible had just happened.

Obi-Wan was taken to his rooms and ordered to bath and change his clothing. He was then fed a quick meal and escorted from the household again. No one was talking to him, even Vexa only gave him orders.

She was clearly upset; whenever he asked her anything her lips thinned into a line and she typed into her slate, simply saying ‘logged’.

Cody was following her lead. His helmet was off, but he was giving Obi-Wan a steel hard look whenever ordering him. The man was seething. Cooking in an oven of helplessness and anger. Obi-Wan had pointed out that Cody could try to protect him all he liked but in the end the power over life and death was still within Obi-Wans clutches.

Waxer and Boil were absent altogether and he decided against asking after them.

Unfortunately, he was not left alone for a moment. Even in the fresher he was followed. Vexa stood with a guard and waited, not willing to let him out of her sight. Afraid perhaps that he’d end himself before she could stop it. The usual guards were joined by two extras. Even so there was a tension in their limbs. Ligaments pulled taut and at the ready.

Because of Vexa’s hyper vigilance he had not been given a chance to go inside himself in search of peace yet. He felt his body shake, his hand tremble. He was riding out the chemicals released in response to Yoda’s violent death. Someone so small, so helpless in the moment of it… it was wrong. He hadn’t bothered pointing this out to anyone… who would care?

The day was not over yet and Jango was not done with him. Because why not fit multiple life changing trauma in one day… Jango obviously thought Obi-Wan could handle it, which was a sort of strange compliment if Obi-Wan thought about it long enough.

They brought him through halls into a throne room built to intimidate, to sow fear. Jango took the high seat, basking in his own echo. Beside him stood the Armorer and two others in full beskar’gam. On a pedestal nearby rested a shallow beskar basin; water within it shimmered like a compounded aurora.

He didn't ask what this new game was yet. Jango had looked him over; he nodded in approval "he didn't give you any more trouble?"

"He complied with all orders." Vexa answered "He will be kept under red watch for the rest of the week as logged by yourself Mand'alor."

Jango nodded.

Obi-Wan saw the Dark Saber at his hip. Saw it swinging down towards that frail green body. The sparce silver hair gleaming like a halo in the sun.

More boots. Mace Windu arrived between two guards, marched forward until he was beside Obi-Wan. Two old friends' side by side just like old times.

"What is all this?" Windu asked, casual. He still had his jedi calm, though it was also in Mace's nature to refuse to be intimidated.

"A test," Jango said. He stepped down to the basin, dipped his fingers, and let water fall back in a thin silver sheet. "Drawn from the Living Waters. They show who one truly is."

Obi-Wan tried to bury the devastation, knew he needed to. He was no help to himself with his consciousness falling off a cliff like a dream on repeat. Caught in the riptide, pulling him back to the moment Yoda had spoken; to his words… hate leads to… He knew the word Yoda hand never gotten to utter.

Did Jango hate him so much? He wanted to ask. To understand.

He pulled himself back from that line of thought… needed to be in the here and now; just as Qui-Gon had taught him. Not before a crowd cheering as the greatest of teachers died. The sound of his head hitting the platform, the eyes open and unblinking as it settled to a stop.

"Bring Windu," Jango said.

The Armorer stepped forward with a beskad whose edge had known centuries. Obi-Wan registered both artifacts at once, the knife and the basin; old as empires, script along their rims that looked like Mando'a written by a hand that remembered ancient constellations, morphed over eons.

Windu was brought to stand opposite the Mand'alor, so that his back faced Obi-Wan. The rest of the room fell to a listening quiet. That was when he became aware of others joining them. Ahsoka, Ventris and… Maul. He flinched at the sight of his twisted smirk. He had to push away other memories flowing unbidden before his eyes.

He returned his focus forcefully back to the Armorer, who cut Jango's palm and let dark drops fall. The water took them without a ripple.

She took Windu's hand next and opened it with equal economy. His blood met the surface. Nothing. Still, they all stood waiting for several minutes. Until Jango nodded, unsurprised. The basin was lifted away by the attending armorers and replaced with a twin.

Jango's gaze flicked up to Obi-Wan. The guards guided him forward.

The new water looked like the old water. a bowl of light. Beautiful.

The Armorer sliced Jango's other hand: one more measure into the basin.

A guard steadied Obi-Wan's wrist lifting it over the basin. The cut was clean and quick. It burned; distance dulled it.

Silence held. No shifting. No breath wasted. Every visor on the water.

For a long, stubborn heartbeat… nothing. Obi-Wan felt relief start to peel back some of the fear in his heart.

Then the surface caught; too bright… white folded into gold, into something older, and light climbed like a living thing. It lifted out of the basin and into the air, poured over Obi-Wan and toward Jango in curtains.

The room forgot him. No one was watching the prisoner anymore. The Guards had let fo of Obi-Wan in surprise, only to shade their eyes from the unbearable light.

Obi-Wan stumbled back, then again, heart hammering. The light was total; it pressed on his eyelids blurring its way into his brain. He made for the doorway, breath tearing.

Yoda's body flashed behind his eyes. Head rolling, small hands bound. He retched a second time and ended kneeling, the light washing over his back like waves, like he was underwater.

It ebbed from sun to torch and left him shaking. He looked down. Symbols he'd never seen before danced faintly across his palms, chasing his veins. He could see them disappearing beneath his sleeves. Kriff… there was no way this was normal.

He surged to his feet, terror suddenly simple and clean. He headed for the door at a run; he could not let anyone see.

"Obi-Wan. Don't." Jango's voice echoed through the massive chamber "there's nowhere to go."

Not long enough ago…

Satine had tried to save him. Perhaps she had been bound to fail; ill-equipped for such things. She was used to wielding her weapons at a table, not here in darkness, grime, and machinery.

She had been relieved when she arrived to find Obi-Wan already alive and a Mandalorian in full beskar'gam assisting him. She thought she recognised the armour but didn't comment or think more on it. She had been too relieved to see Obi-Wan unharmed. Safe… or safer.

They had been on the move again quickly, Fett, because she was sure that was who was directing them, and for whatever reason Obi-Wan seemed willing to go along with whatever plan Fett suggested.

She had to argue on principle. Fett was a savage. He seemed to think as little of her as she did of him. But, well, her arguments soon stopped; survival dictated that, for now at least and she needed to focus on that instead of making some well-earned points.

She had to welcome him into the palace after that. It would have been frowned upon not to, after he'd helped them. After Fett had saved them both.

At dinner Fett was, thankfully, quiet. Instead, he watched and listened attentively as she and Obi-Wan prattled on about old times. Obi-Wan had been as pleased as ever to spend time with her. It was a shame they didn't have more of it. He always came alive in their conversations.

Fett eventually excused himself and left to "complete repairs" on his ship. That was when she'd asked Obi-Wan about him. Her concern grew with each of Obi-Wan's easy tales of teamwork: the close calls, the timely rescues. Fett always handy to help.

"Obi-Wan, I don't say this to ruin your friendship," Satine said at last, swirling her wine. "But Fett, by nature, never does anything that doesn't benefit himself."

"I have considered that," he said, hand going to his beard without thought. "I do believe the arrangement is mutually beneficial. I've assisted him almost as many times as the reverse."

Satine was not convinced. "He's dangerous." She paused. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

Obi-Wan considered her. "Jango has proven himself. He has risked his life for mine more than once."

Satine looked at him sideways. "You're being naïve."

"Says the pacifist."

"Consciously choosing peace does not make me naïve, Obi-Wan," she said, nose wrinkling the way it always did when he got under her skin. "It comes from facing violence and deciding not to continue a cycle that never ends."

"A cycle stopped by… hiding from it?"

She wrinkled her nose further at that, and he felt warmth spread in his chest. It was so familiar it hurt. "We, as always, remain the same," he said with a small smile. "Neither of us will change."

She shook her head. "We come to the same impasse." Sadness flickered in her eyes. "But do hear me, Obi-Wan. Fett is up to something. There are rumours he's the true mind behind Death Watch now."

Obi-Wan did a double take. “That makes no sense. If you’ll remember, it was Death Watch Fett just rescued us from. If that were so, why the theatrics?”

Her gaze grew distant. “That’s what worries me the most. He’s playing some game with you.”

Obi-Wan considered her point and filed it away, even as he found himself wanting to defend Fett.

Meanwhile, Jango had returned to his room to get his buy’ce. He had no intention of repairing anything; he simply wanted to spy on Obi-Wan and the Kryze fierfek. He needed to know her intentions toward his Runi’oyay’dinuir.

He’d seen the way they looked at each other. Seen the traitor risk her life to fight for Obi-Wan’s. Her sudden arrival at his pre-planned display, intended to strengthen Obi-Wan’s trust in him, had most irritatingly derailed his plans. He’d always been good at improvising, but he’d been too annoyed to find a smooth pivot around her.

Through the helmet’s systems he found them now, sitting by a window overlooking the cityscape, sipping wine. They were close. Too close. Then Kryze leaned in to kiss Obi-Wan and… Obi-Wan leaned into it. They kissed. Obi-Wan kissed her back.

It had been only months ago that he’d been the one kissing Obi-Wan. They’d shared breath. They’d been… Jango had been where she was now.

He paused, forcing his breathing to slow, trying to get his thoughts into a coherent string. He wanted to break her neck right there, to throw her off the balcony. But that would only drive Obi-Wan away from him.

He turned and left, ordering some of his people to interrupt their little liaison. Next, he got a hold of Maul. They were going to accelerate the plan. Satine had stolen enough from him. She would die soon. But now, her death would also teach his Runi’oyay’dinuir a much-needed lesson.

Maul would make sure Obi-Wan was present. Make sure Obi-Wan understood that he had no one to blame but himself.

Chapter 36: Unexpectedly Dependable

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay guys. Been busy with study. We are past the half way mark on this fic.... so we are building up to .... stuff. I hope the waiting is worth it!

Not long enough ago…

At the start of the war Jango saw only a Jedi. Then Cody's updates began to stack. After-action reports. Helmet-cam clips. Comments from troopers who didn't waste words: *the generals a machine, but kind about it*. Respect accrued, then loyalty. Obi-Wan turned a battalion, quenching some sort of unseen hunger like a premium batch of spice.

Jango watched the vids. Against droids, Kenobi was fearless, his movement honed to a razor, grace welded to purpose. A weapon no sane commander wanted pointed their way. The more Jango studied his Runi'oyay'dinuir, the more he needed to study him again.

He'd planned to drift into Kenobi's orbit slowly, build rapport before things collapsed. Familiarity first; comfort later, so that he could be an anchor. Instead, he jumped the line. Obsession has a way of moving timelines.

First contact after Geonosis felt like meeting him twice: once skewed by the story in Jango's head, and once with the truth. It was on the frigid moon Caliban. Grievous had a handful of clones and one very valuable Jedi strung up over a coolant cistern. Jango cut the magnaguards off at the catwalk, burned a wrist-rocket through the lock array, and kicked the harness release. Kenobi hit metal, rolled, came up already shepherding his men toward exfil like the fall was part of the plan.

"Thank you," the Jedi said, the subtle signs of relief in his voice, irritatingly sincere. Debt sat wrong on Kenobi; Jango could feel it, Obi-Wan didn't trust a man he was indebted to.

From there it became a pattern. Jango slipped him intel, blind drops, burner channels, a crate that wasn't on any manifest. Kenobi paid in kind: a ping before a raid, a door left unsecured, made sure Jango could keep being helpful to the war effort, or at least he suspected that's what Obi-Wan had convinced himself of. Useful became habit; habit became familiarity. They laughed once in the cold shadow under a landing strut. It surprised both of them.

Jango had wanted to see the man instead of the myth. He did. Worse, he liked what he saw. Somewhere between the reports and the rescues, Obi-Wan stopped being *a* Jedi and became the person he didn't want to lose, the fact that he couldn't risk Obi-Wan's life seemed to matter less, more important that he didn't want to… not anymore.

They'd hauled six troopers out of a Separatist kill-box, limped a shuttle to orbit on fumes, and docked to Slave I with the hull still ticking from heat. Jango sent the clones to the cargo bay to rack out under blankets and chemical warmers, then steered Kenobi and Boba to the galley; cramped but comfortable.

Boba peeled his buy'ce and set it carefully in the netted rack, then dropped onto a crate. "You bleeding on the deck?" he asked, chin flicking at the tear along Kenobi's sleeve.

"Only theatrically," Obi-Wan said, studying the line with mild interest. "Your father rescued me before I could commit to it."

Jango ladled stew from a battered pot. Ration base improved with actual flavour, spiced paste, a pinch of red crush, something smoky he wouldn't name. He set three bowls down; spoons magnetized to the table so turbulence couldn't throw them.

Obi-Wan sniffed, cautious, then took a spoonful. His eyes widened a fraction. "That is… edible."

Boba snorted. "High praise from a Jetii."

"Temple cuisine trains the palate to humility," Obi-Wan said solemnly, then ruined it with the corner of a smile. "This is excellent."

Jango ate without comment. Noting that food was appreciated by Obi-Wan. Only the best then when he was finally in his custody.

They ate like men who hadn't had the chance for a day or two, quick at first, then slower as the heat settled in. The ship's guts hummed through the bulkheads.

"Your cut on the coolant line," Obi-Wan said after a while, to Boba. "Three seconds earlier than I would have tried it. Good call."

Boba's mouth twitched toward pride before he caught it. "Didn't have three seconds," he said. "Magnaguard was spooling up."

"True," Obi-Wan conceded. "I was busy pretending not to fall."

"You looked like you meant it," Boba said, deadpan.

"That," Obi-Wan said, "is the art."

Jango watched them volley. The ease surprised him. Not the words; the cadence. Kenobi could entice a feral Tooka into his arms. Boba hated him but couldn't escape his orbit. The give-and-take found a shape that didn't grind. It felt… normal. Dangerous, how good normal felt.

Obi-Wan turned the bowl in both hands, warming his fingers. Up close Jango could catalogue the tells of weariness: the dark rings under his eyes, the careful roll of shoulders that said there were bruises under fabric; a film of moisture on his skin. The man had bled for strangers all day and would again tomorrow without making a speech about it.

“Your men are stubborn,” Jango said, because silence would say more. “Refused to rest, the medic wanted to check you over immediately, I told them to lie down, or I’d vent the compartment.”

Obi-Wan’s mouth went rueful. “They take after their template.”

Boba looked at Jango. “You negotiate with clones now?”

“I negotiate with anyone who’s awake,” Jango said. “Saves time.”

Obi-Wan’s laugh was quiet and real. Boba pretended not to enjoy it, then ruined the pretence by asking, “So what’s the Temple teach you about hull patches?”

“That the Force is with epoxy,” Obi-Wan said solemnly.

“Blasphemy,” Jango said. “It’s with zip-ties.”

The moment landed easy as a hand to a shoulder. They ate. Boba told stories and Obi-Wan listened, making comments in all the right places. Obi-Wan was worn, but it didn’t show with how he talked to Boba.

Jango only partially listened, plans working on repeat through his head. Rapport: established. Trust: edging toward useful. Every instinct told him to keep it steady, to stretch this runway as far as it would go. But timelines don’t care about instinct. And Kenobi; this version sitting at his table, warming his hands on a shipboard bowl, unguarded enough to share a joke, would never walk away from the Order and into what Jango needed. Not on words. Not on dinners. Not for him.

He felt the thought like grit in the joint. *Shame to break a thing that finally moves smoothly.* Shame was irrelevant. Empires were not built on the comfort of single evenings.

Obi-Wan finished and set the spoon back; it clicked into place. “Thank you, Boba. Jango.” He inclined his head, that ridiculous civility he wore even when his hair was singed at the tips. “You didn’t have to come back for them.”

“I did,” Jango said. He didn’t add *because they’re mine, too*, or *because you were with them.* He didn’t add *because I need you alive.* He stood and gathered bowls. “Bunk’s free in the crew alcove. You snore; I space you.”

“Understood,” Obi-Wan said dryly. “I’ll breathe with decorum.”

Boba slid off the crate. “I’ll take first check on the hold.”

“Sleep,” Jango told him. “I’ll wake you.”

Boba hesitated, then gave Obi-Wan a look that wasn’t quite a scowl. “Nice flying,” he said, as if forced.

“And you,” Obi-Wan returned, as if knighted.

The kid's ears went a little pink. He left before anyone could notice.

They were alone two breaths longer than was comfortable. Obi-Wan stood, bracing one hand on the table, swayed a little and moved towards the bunk. Jango saw the tremor he hid and pretended not to.

"You'll have your pickup in four hours," Jango said. "I'll keep the beacon dark until the window."

Obi-Wan nodded. "You've been… unexpectedly dependable."

"Don't get used to it."

"That seems like sensible advice." He paused at the hatch, then glanced back. "For what it's worth, I enjoy this. Talking like," He seemed to search for a word that didn't incriminate either of them. "Colleagues."

"Don't," Jango said, before the word could settle. It came out softer than he meant. "Not yet."

The moment passed slowly. Obi-Wan's expression didn't change much, but Jango watched the understanding slide into place behind the eyes. The man could read a battlefield and a negotiation with ease… it was a dangerous skill if Jango wasn't careful.

"Very well," Obi-Wan said. "Not yet."

When he was gone, Jango stood a long time with his hands on the rim of the sink, watching the thin slick of stew circle the drain. Boba's boots scuffed in the corridor, then quieted. Slave I's systems hummed their old, faithful song.

Plans are in motion, he told himself, because naming it kept it from turning into something softer. *Keep them so.*

He shut the locker, killed the galley lights, and let the dark close over them, then headed to the cargo hold for a full report.

Obi-Wan knew there was no escape. He wasn't trying. He only needed distance, space enough for whatever this was to burn out, before anyone could *see*. Once they saw, they'd decide what it meant and never let it go, and his scepticism would be waved off like insolence.

He stopped at the threshold. Outside, Vexa and half the household guard stepped forward in a clean line, ready. He angled to slip past, but the far corridor filled as well: Jango, the Armorer, and an escort closing in from behind. He couldn't stop this any more than he'd stopped anything else.

Jango wasn't rimmed in light. No faint runes crawled his skin. Whatever this was, it had chosen Obi-Wan alone. Story of his life.

"Obi-Wan," Jango said, as gentle as the bounty hunter could make himself. "Don't fight us. Choose not to fight us."

Obi-Wan angled toward the far corner; if nothing else, a few more moments. He could feel *them* closing in. Inevitable. Maybe, but in the next breaths, the markings might fade.

He ended up cornered, huddled small, sleeves dragged down in a hopeless attempt to hide the light.

"We need to secure him now and record the phenomenon," the Armorer said.

"Hold," Obi-Wan managed, voice broken.

"Logged," Jango said. "Give him a moment."

Obi-Wan wanted to shut off the negotiator in his skull clocking how Jango was staging himself as saviour. He wanted to be dull—dulled—anything to make this easier.

"Mand'alor," the Armorer said, reverent and firm, "this is a sign from the Manda. Sacred. We should treat it as such."

Jango ignored her. "Obi-Wan, walk to me. We go to Medical together and record the markings. Or Vexa applies restraints. Which do you choose?"

Obi-Wan swallowed the sob, tried to pull everything back inside. He searched Jango's face for the man he had once known. He wasn't there.

"Please," he whispered. "Jango… please."

Jango's gaze didn't waver. He moved with that careful, predator-calm meant not to spook prey. He held out a hand; steady, palm up. "It's okay, ner cyar'ika. I'm here. Choose to come with me."

Obi-Wan took it, his hand shaking, not because this was what he wanted. because it wasn't. Because he could see how this would go if he didn't. The calm hit like a sedative; numbness. A switch flipped. He hated that it worked. But hadn't he wanted this? The dullness. The peace.

Jango moved to take Obi-wan by the nape. He felt the peace sweep in like a flood on cracked dry ground. He staggered, but Jango was there to steady him. A breath at his ear sent shivers down his body. "Let's get you to medical my Runi'oyay'dinuir."

The 'peace' was a flood; thick and wrong. Not water; poison. It seeped into the cracks and kept coming.

Chapter 37: Yanna was Here

Chapter Notes

> Some of you may have noticed there are two anonymous authors on this fic now. One of us is a brilliant artist, and the other is me... so if you see me talking to myself; rest assured I'm not mad. I'm talking to the artist.

Ventress didn't know what was happening any more than Ahsoka. Still, officials were expected to show when the Mand'alor called a public announcement. The younglings from the new temple stood in neat ranks off to the side of the platform, wards of Mandalore, to be seen and not heard. Future weapons.

The crowd grew restless; they'd been summoned that morning and had been streaming in ever since. Ahsoka invented games to keep the lines calm. Ventress refused to help, not that Ahsoka expected otherwise. Ventress gravitated to the older initiates, the ones most likely to turn difficult. She was fighting for their lives, and Ahsoka was relieved Ventress had taken that mantle; Ahsoka wasn't sure she could.

Yanna, a twelve-year-old Wookiee girl, tested every seam in the system. She ran again and again. Ventress always found her and brought her back, and each time she was called before the Council for the Conservation of Force-Sensitive Persons (CoFP) to beg leniency. Because of Yanna's age, they granted it four times. Then Yanna turned thirteen.

At thirteen, the law changed. Three strikes. Extensions existed, but only by order of the Mand'alor himself. After Yanna's second post-birthday attempt, Ahsoka asked Ventress to let her try. Ventress warned her: the girl hated her. It hurt to hear, but Ahsoka tried anyway.

Yanna reacted exactly as predicted. The youngling's eyes flashed orange as she charged, clumsy with fury. In that instant, Ahsoka knew there was no path for Yanna that ended in integration.

A few days later, Yanna tried again. The next morning Ventress took her before the CoFP, and that afternoon Ventress returned alone.

Ahsoka chose to let it go. She released what she could into the Force; like old times, like a Jedi. She let the guilt pass through and set her focus on the here and now, on the younglings she could still save.

Jango felt the instant something in Obi-Wan gave way, a hard swallow, downcast eyes, shoulders folding in. He only needed a small push now. Obi-Wan's bloodshot gaze searched his face.

"Please," he whispered. "Jango… please."

The sound shook, and Jango's mouth went dry. This was what he had hunted like a starving strill pack worrying a wounded quarry's legs: Obi-Wan's submission.

He moved in slowly, predator-calm, while Obi-Wan tried to hide the light flaring under his skin. Wonder rose in him sharp and bright; that the Manda had set such a creature in his care.

He offered his hand, palm up, unthreatening. "It's okay, ner cyar'ika. I'm here. Choose to come with me."

Obi-Wan looked at the hand; something in his gaze hardened. He understood there was no choice. He looked away as he took it. Even shame looked beautiful on his Runi'oyay'dinuir.

Contact sent a warm current up Jango's arm, cresting at the shoulder and spreading through his chest and limbs like comfort.

The Jedi was finished, Jango told himself; the man would bend. Satisfaction sparked, hot and clean, as he guided Obi-Wan with the lightest pressure of his fingertips.

He led them toward Medical. Each step weighed more than it should. His thoughts kept slewing toward his rooms, toward the ease of this obedience, the tilt of a throat, the quiet that followed decision. Greed vibrated low in his gut. He swallowed it. There would be time. Discipline first. The sign had appeared; it must be logged, studied, proven.

They reached the surgical theatre where Obi-Wan had lain before. Mij waited sceptical, as ever, until he saw the light in Obi-Wan's skin. Scepticism drained away. Some things had to be seen.

"Recorders up," Mij said, voice going brisk. "No touch without callouts. Ren, get spectrum. I want thermal and ion wash on continuous."

"On it," Ren answered from the gantry.

Jango glanced to the gallery. Clan leaders were already filing in; the viewing rooms were filling fast.

Obi-Wan let out a small whimper when Vexa and one of her care team began to remove his tunic. Light hummed from within him and Jango knew this would further solidify his power. Jango sent more peace Obi-Wans way and watched the tension leave his shoulders again. He felt a wave of protectiveness when Obi-Wans tights were pulled down, and he was helped to step out of them. Left only in his smalls.

The scan crawled. Jango never broke skin contact. Spikes of tension ran through Obi-Wan, muscle knotting, tendons singing tight. Then, breath by breath, he leaned into the touch and surrendered the moment back to silence.

Control, Jango realized, was only a sheath. The edge was still there, bright and waiting. Obedience would need layers; restraints seen and unseen.

As Obi-Wan relaxed further he allowed himself to look over Obi-Wan's almost naked body. Unveiled were beautiful planes of smooth skin, nipples the perfect shade of dusk, veins of light strewn in strange patterns. The shape of him, the flawlessness and the scars, all perfect, all his.

Jango couldn't stop himself from splaying his hand over Obi-Wans ribcage. Over lines of light, glyphs still alight on his skin. He felt Obi-Wan shudder and attempt to move forward, But Jango had him by the nape and Obi-Wan's inner struggle was over fast.

Obi-Wan's helplessness burrowed into the deepest shadows of his psyche. He couldn't stop the way his thoughts turned to what he wanted…needed. Obi-Wan laid out like a feast. Jango taking his full. Temptation strained against discipline.

He swallowed, trying to direct his thoughts elsewhere. Grateful he was wearing his beskar'gam, as it was able to hide his weakness. He would need to speak alone with Mij later.

He stayed behind once Obi-Wan was re-dressed and ushered back to the household.

He addressed the clan leaders first. They looked at him with the fervent loyalty he expected. When the last door sealed, Jango turned to Mij and gave a single nod.

"Mand'alor," Mij said without looking up. "Your Runi'oyay'dinuir's scans are uploading. Photogrammetry on the markings is clean. The Armorer will receive the full file as requested."

"Good. Hormone levels?"

"Progressing as we hoped. Nearing readiness. The veil should be thinning. He'll have mood swings; you expected that."

"And me?"

"As warned, with physical contact you're also undergoing hormonal shifts. This isn't an exact science. What we have is a millennium old."

"Are there any options to curb my libido? Nothing I do eases my appetite." Jango folded his arms.

"Proximity to the subject produces a predictable co-activation," Mij said, clinical and calm. "Your limbic complex spikes; pleasant arousal, reward circuitry. But so does the parasympathetic axis in *him* when you contact the nape. Heart rate down, cortisol down, vagal tone up. In return, your hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal axis nudges upward; testosterone, dopamine, a little oxytocin. The Armorer's texts call the loop a narek'cyare cascade: *bond-partner nearness response.*"

Jango was a statue. "Translation."

“It’s normal,” Mij said. “Expected. A biological response to the *bond* and to your specific contact patterns. Congratulations: your nervous system works.”

Jango considered the information silently.

Mij flicked to a second chart. “The Armorer’s manuscripts; *Kyr’amar Rites*, *Kote be’Solus*, describe the same pattern: a dyadic regulation loop. In plainer Basic: when you steady him, your body pays for the privilege with urge and focus shift. When he’s cut off from the outer currents, your nape touch becomes his fastest sedative. You complete a circuit.”

“Management,” Jango said.

“There are options, *or* you could consider putting the word out, requesting volunteers?” Mij asked with a small smirk, which disappeared at Jango’s unamused response.

“I could Kriff half the empire and it would change nothing.”

“Only half?” Mij asked dryly.

Jango was amused this time but hid it well “remember your place Mij.”

Mij considered him seriously “The simplest fix would be taxing for you.”

Jango gestured for Mij to continue.

Mij considered his next words carefully “I mean this seriously, despite my delivery” he leaned back against the examination table behind him “The crux of the problem could be treated… if you would kriff your Runi’oyay’dinuir.”

Mij watched Jango’s face close off darkly and knew he’d pushed a little too far, hastily he added “again, I mean that seriously Mand’alor, it would stabilise the bond and settle the hormone fluctuations in both of you.”

“He’s not ready.” Jango stated.

Mij nodded pulling up some information to show Jango “I knew you’d say that. I have other options prepared…”

Obi-Wan was led silently back through security into the household. His state drew looks from staff who were usually unflappable. They took him to the training room; he had nothing left to give it and didn’t so much as jog the perimeter. When Vexa’s attempts to coax engagement failed, she ushered him on to the office to read.

He took a book and pretended, to keep her satisfied. She worried for him in her way; always gauging, always taking his measure. His well-being mattered to them, even as they slowly

dismantled his will.

By dinner the markings had begun to fade, though not enough to avoid surprise. The server who brought his tray stumbled at the sight, lurched into Obi-Wan, and sent the food skidding across the table.

He had never seen Vexa so angry. The man stammered an apology, and Obi-Wan knew the blunder would cost him.

More staff arrived; the mess vanished; a fresh plate appeared. Vexa's face had gone to stone. "I apologise, Runi'oyay'dinuir, for the blunder of my staff. Rest assured, they will be dealt with accordingly."

"It's all right, Vexa. No harm done," Obi-Wan said.

She inclined her head. His forgiveness would not change the man's fate. He didn't have the energy to feel anything about it. He ate.

They'd been standing for hours.

Ahsoka kept the lines straight and the little ones busy. Counting games. Quiet competitions. "How many red pauldrons from here to the pylon?" "How long can you breathe slow; four in, six out?" Ventress wouldn't play along; she drifted with the teens like a knife through cloth, eyes on the ones who might bolt.

When the chant rolled in waves, "Mand'alor! Mand'alor!", Ahsoka felt the lines tense like a herd before bad weather. She moved along the front rank, tapping shoulders, catching eyes.

"Eyes on me," she said softly. "If it gets loud, we go to the grounding drill. You remember."

Nods. A Wookiee boy, smaller than Yanna had been, gripped the hem of her coat and didn't let go.

The translator lattice pinged from the pylons. Jango's voice carried clean across the square between stretches of Mando'a. Ahsoka didn't look at the podium. She kept her gaze level with youngling eyes, counting breaths, hand signals small and practiced.

Then the escort came through the side gate: two guards, short shadow between them.

Master Yoda walked as if the heat didn't touch him.

"Hold," Ventress murmured, stepping up so her cloak could spill wide as if she could shield them from this. Ahsoka appreciated the thought and didn't say it. They both knew when to argue and when not to.

Obi-Wan was already up there, knees on stone, two guards at his arms. He looked… contained. Too contained. Ahsoka didn't let her attention stick. Not now. Not with this audience.

Jango spoke: justice, mercy, sentence. The crowd answered on cue. The Darksaber lit with that wrong sound, low and hungry, light that wasn't light. She wanted to surge forward and beg the Mand'alor to stop this. Wanted to shield Yoda's body and take the strike herself. But she had younglings to protect. The front row flinched; Ahsoka lifted her hands, palms open. Not what she wanted to do, but what she had to for the youngling's sake.

"Grounding," she said, calm as a teacher calls for quiet. "Feet planted. Hands behind your backs. Pick a point on the floor. Breathe with me."

In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four, five, six.

Master Yoda turned his head. The line of his profile caught the sun. His eyes found her, *found them* over the sea of helms. Ears bowed, gaze steady. Then he turned to where Obi-Wan was kneeling. He was speaking to him, but she could not hear what he was saying.

The stroke was mercifully clean.

The crowd roared. The translator lattice didn't try to render the sound the Darksaber made when it cut. Ahsoka kept breathing. In, four. Out, six. Her throat went tight anyway. The Wookiee boy made a sound she pretended not to hear and pressed his face to her sleeve.

"Eyes on me," she said again, softer. "We stand. We breathe. We do not look."

Obi-Wan heaved once on his knees, then stilled. Cody's hand hovered and withdrew. Jango spoke to the square, more words about order, law, future. Ahsoka let them go by like wind over stone.

This was what Ventress had told her to expect: the line they would walk if they stayed, the things they'd have to see, the things they'd keep the children from seeing. Ahsoka could feel the pull, the old reflex to fight, to fly, to scream the whole thing down. She let it pass through. She chose the work in front of her.

"Count the banners," she said to the front row, voice steadier than her stomach. "Only the blue ones."

"Three," whispered a Rodian girl.

"Good. Keep counting."

Ventress came in close enough that only Ahsoka could hear. "He's going to dismiss the crowd and move them," she said, chin toward the podium. "We should be gone before the crush."

"I'll take them up the service stairs," Ahsoka answered. "You sweep the rear."

Ventress's mouth twitched. "I'm not letting your little saints get trampled."

The translator lattice clipped off. The chant didn't, at least not right away. Command voices rose from the platform; lines of guards repositioned in practiced waves. Ahsoka signalled. Two long, one short: follow. The youngest filed behind her, hands linked in pairs.

They moved down the side, into the shadow of a maintenance colonnade, up the narrow stairs that smelled of oil and heat. Ahsoka kept the cadence of the breathing drill under her breath.

On the landing, with the worst of the noise below, she stopped them in a pocket of shade. Counted heads. Counted again. Everyone.

The Wookiee boy still had her coat. She crouched to his height.

"Master Yoda?" he asked in a voice too young for the word master.

Ahsoka held his gaze. She could lie. She could tell the truth. She chose the part that would not break him.

"He finished his lesson," she said. "Now we finish ours."

"What lesson?" a human girl asked from the second row, cheeks wet and furious.

"That fear wants to make you smaller," Ahsoka said. "And we don't let it."

Ventress arrived with the older group, face like carved obsidian, cloak hiding whatever it hid. She met Ahsoka's eyes, gave the smallest nod, no strays, no runners.

"Temple, now," Ahsoka said, rising. "We'll debrief in the practice hall. Then food. Then rest."

"Then more drills," Ventress added dryly.

Ahsoka didn't argue. The children needed both: a place to put their feelings, and a shape to put their day in.

As they moved, Ahsoka looked back once over the railing. The platform below was a geometry of motion: medics, armorers, command. Obi-Wan was being led inside. Jango stood at the edge of the shadow, helmet under his arm, a black line where the blade had been.

Ahsoka turned away and guided her line into the cooler dim. She could grieve later. She could think about what it meant later. For now: count the steps; keep the pace; shepherd the living.

In, four. Out, six.

They went home.

Chapter 38: Tip Was Here

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys! Thank you so much for all of the encouragement during this emotional blip. I'm back, and I have a beta who's way better than AI. It's really good to have someone to bounce ideas off. I hope it shows in this chapter, and all those going forward. I hope you all enjoy! thanks again everyone who sent me all those kind messages!

Obi-Wan was not permitted any significant time alone. That night, Mij administered a sedative, citing a high-stress week. The next morning Vexa woke him, hurried him through breakfast, and then escorted him to the instruction annex. It was strange stepping back into that space. Mij's lesson still burned at the edges of his mind. Always tender, hard to ignore. Being back at the annex was unsettling.

Finding Boil waiting for him was a surprise; Boil had been missing for a couple of weeks now. He tamped down the flicker of relief, although Boil was not his friend. He wanted to ask about Waxer too, but again, he hesitated. The ba'jur'alor choose that moment to step into view holding a datapad.

"Right on time, Vexa. As always," he said, looking past Obi-Wan.

"Of course," Vexa replied. "Stability comes with predictability."

As Vexa departed, the ba'jur'alor directed Obi-Wan to sit across from Boil. Four guards remained inside; clearly, they were still sensitive about his excursion. He knew there would be little leniency today.

"Runi'oyay'dinuir, today you will listen to Boil, interview him, and write your report. Do you understand your assignment?"

Too tired for the comeback perched on his tongue, Obi-Wan only nodded. "Yes, ba'jur'alor. I remember." It was another manipulation. Although unacknowledged, they all knew it.

"Very well. Proceed." The instructor set the datapad in front of Obi-Wan for notes, took his seat, and began to work, apparently ignoring them.

"Obi-Wan," Boil said.

"Boil."

With his focus off the instructor, he noticed changes in the trooper: somehow younger, yet worn at the edges, tired.

“I’m going to start by telling you about one of my bunkmates,” Boil said. “Tip.”

Obi-Wan inclined his head to show he was listening.

Not long enough ago…

Waxer and Boil dragged Tip back into the bunkroom. “That was close,” Boil said.

Tip went straight to his bunk-side table and tipped his favorite possession, a loose bolt, over the edge. It clanged on the deck. A moment later he did it again. “Tip! Tip! Tip!” he chirped, pleased with the sound. The name had stuck long before they knew why they’d need it.

The others filed in and gathered at the far end. They’d just turned five and had begun the more physical phase of training. It was harder than academics, especially when it came to hiding Tip.

Despite appearances, Tip was whip-smart. He could memorize long strings of text and recite them back without a slip. He remembered things the others didn’t and could readily address straightforward questions. Verbal drills proved to be a different story, although the long-necks didn’t use them much. When they did, Tip’s differences showed as he repeated the question back to the asker, delighted to get the sounds right.

They’d been hiding Tip for years, ever since they realized “different” meant being taken somewhere else. Tip was their brother. They wouldn’t be separated.

“It was your turn to distract them,” Waxer snapped at another boy.

“I didn’t want to get in trouble either,” the boy muttered, eyes on the floor.

“I was already in trouble this week. I almost got isolation,” Waxer shot back.

“It was your turn,” others echoed.

They took turns making small mistakes whenever Tip did something that might make him stand out. Spread out like that, none of them drew too much focus.

“We all take turns because it’s safer,” Waxer said. “We can’t let any of us stand out, not just Tip.”

“You think we can keep this up forever?” someone asked. “Maybe we should let them put him somewhere else. We’d miss him, but… they’ll find out eventually.”

“We don’t even know where they take them.”

“Or if we’d ever see him again.”

“So, we find out,” Waxer said. “We learn where the flunks go and see for ourselves. We’ll get the intel, then we’ll decide.”

Tip, happy, tapped his bolt on the table in a steady rhythm: clunk… pause… clunk-clunk. He did it again. And again.

Boil frowned. “Hear that? It’s not random, the rhythm. He’s tapping out the maintenance pulse from the coolant stacks, same spacing every time.”

Tip grinned and matched the pattern: Tip… tip… tip-tip.

“That’s our cover,” Boil decided. “We move and make noise only on the clunks. We can get the vent screws out without a peep.”

There was a boy in Hall Seven that the long-necks were watching. “Variance outside cohort thresholds,” they’d murmured. “Candidate for Reassignment Protocol.” The boys still called it flunking.

“If they come for him,” Boil said, laying down the plan, “one of us makes a distraction. Two follow. We see what happens. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” they said together.

Boil paused. “Waxer and I followed them. We hid in a storage cabinet when they got distracted.” He swallowed. “The boy was already strapped to a table. Scared.”

The memory came with smells and sounds: sharp antiseptic, the insect-hum of lights. Boil pushed such details aside with the retelling: they didn’t matter.

“We saw them inject something into the top of his head. He cried and pled for help. Then he shook, went rigid. They left when the monitor went silent.” Boil’s voice thinned. “Droids took him. We followed. They put him in the garbage incinerator. We didn’t even know his name.”

His skin mottled; his breathing went thick. He turned away.

Obi-Wan felt a cold weight climb his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said. It sounded small. He didn’t want to be sorry; it made him vulnerable to his captors when he wanted to stay strong.

Boil let the silence sit. The ba’jur’alor pretended not to listen, but they both knew he was monitoring everything.

“That’s when we knew,” Boil said at last. “We had to do whatever it took. We couldn’t let them take Tip like that. But the older we got, the harder it was to hide. It was obvious to everyone he wasn’t like us.”

“We trained with him in secret,” he added. “We tried to get him to copy us. He’d echo what we said and follow our movements. I think he thought it was a game, but once the long-necks started observing… we knew our time was up.”

Not long enough ago…

Tip wasn’t where they’d left him, but he wasn’t hard to find. When they did, following the bolt’s tapping sound, they tried to find a better hiding place. Waxer pried up the screws on a larger ventilation shaft, coaxed Tip inside, and then replaced the grate. There had been no way to separate Tip from his bolt; it had to go with Tip. They hoped that the bolt’s noise would blend into the machinery’s general racket.

Maintenance found it anyway. They were resealing the shaft when the boys rounded the corner. No Tip.

They ran despite knowing that it would prove that they’d hidden him. Down the hall, Tip walked hand-in-hand with a Kaminoan. They called his name. He turned, eyes bright, and waved. The Kaminoan allowed it, curious.

“Stick to the plan, Tip!” Tip called back, delighted with the words. Then, he dropped his bolt. It hit the floor with a terrible echo.

For the first time, Tip didn’t go to pick it up. He left it there.

Boil sprinted to grab it, to hand it back to Tip, to give him that one small comfort at least, but hands caught them. Isolation followed: a box, low air, stale plastic, puzzle after puzzle that never ended. When they came out, they were quiet in new ways. Tip’s bunk stayed empty.

They never saw him again.

Boil took something from his side pouch and set it between them. A bolt.

“Clone 99 picked it up and brought it to me. I’ve carried it ever since. Everywhere I’ve been, he’s been too.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes stayed on the metal. Simple, but not in any way that mattered.

A relic, he thought, which was a strange thought for a Jedi. Jedi didn’t mourn those gone. The Order taught release, not relics. The clones had taught themselves love in a place built on

salted ground. In some, that love seeded defiance; after enough losses, it curdled toward vengeance. He could not say they were wrong.

“By the time you came, it was already too late for me,” Boil said. “For my bunk-mates. Things were taken from us—things other children don’t even know they still have.”

“I am sorry,” Obi-Wan said, and meant it.

“Save it.” Boil’s voice thinned, then steadied. “You were the best of them. And you still left. You saw us, then you walked away. You could have saved us, but you chose the mission. You left thousands of child slaves like you’d never seen them at all.”

“I intended to return,” Obi-Wan said. “Finish the mission. Inform the Council. Come back.”

“You didn’t come back, and you didn’t help us. Not in any way that truly counted. The killings stopped, but there were no charges. No justice. If they’d been Republic kids, free kids…”

“It wasn’t that simple.”

“Jango pulled the numbers. Do you know how many children were disposed of by the Kaminoans?”

Obi-Wan stayed silent.

“Didn’t think so. Did you even look?”

“I… there was too much at stake. Billions of lives…”

“Fifty-six thousand,” Boil said, voice rising. He studied Obi-Wan’s face for a long moment. “Remember that number… fifty-six thousand Tips that your council… you… didn’t care about. You refused to see what you didn’t want to, and it cost lives…. innocent lives. And that’s before you even count the war causalities.” Boil sounds angry now, and Obi-Wan couldn’t help but feel the same.

“The Jedi didn’t know about that.” Obi-Wan said voice raising to meet Boil’s. “You can’t hold us to account for things outside our knowledge. You claim that I didn’t care? That I don’t? Then why are you here?”

Boil leaned back. “I’m here because I’m not a Jedi. I care. Waxer cares. Cody cares. Jango cares more than any of us. To us this isn’t just a game of numbers. You are not just a number to us!”

“Why? If I’m responsible for so much death, then execute me and be done with it!” Obi-Wan was vaguely aware of the guards moving closer, of the ba’jur’alor indicating that they should not intervene, for now… his own enslavement obvious to anyone willing to look. “Though I suppose any fate I deserve is equally deserved by yourself.”

Boil leaned forward and snatched up the bolt. “You’re such a … Jedi.”

The ba'jur'alor interrupted then "tenses."

Boil paused. "Right… sorry. You're not a Jedi any longer." He took a few breaths. "The Jedi used millions of clones as nothing but cannon fodder for years. Then you have the gall to act like the Jedi are the victims in this? The Jedi were thieves! The council was evil. You were the best of them, but even you are not innocent. You came to Kamino. You saw for yourself."

In the eye of the storm is where he left himself, a piece safe, tucked away for the potential of another life. He didn't turn back as he walked away. A door shut. He stepped, uncaring into the wall of the storm.

"You might be right. We had good intentions, but they mean nothing now. So do yours. I don't care about the war any longer. I don't care about the clones, or the separatists, or Jango. I don't care about you."

Boil looked taken aback. Obi-Wan couldn't understand why. He didn't know what the man wanted from him.

"I am curious to know if the entire war was just a long-winded revenge plot? If that's the case then you only have yourselves to blame for your losses during the war, self-inflicted wounds, as they say."

"Tip deserved justice!" Boil replied angrily.

"And you have it! How many clones died for the fifty-six thousand? How many clones died for your petty revenge? How many civilians? How many Jedi? I hope you are satisfied… I'm sure Tip will rest in peace knowing…."

Obi-Wan tipped sideways in surprise. Pain exploded in his cheek. There was a sound of rushing feet and hands on him, restraining him. He looked up to see Boil, stricken, white faced and trembling, secured as well. In a moment of pure spite, Obi-Wan smiled at him. There was blood in his mouth. He hoped he looked as bad as he felt.

Not long enough ago….

Waxer, Boil, and Obi-Wan shared a fire that night. Tired from battle, they watched as their general made dinner out of ration packs over their fire. He was prattling on about ways that he'd discovered to make them more palatable.

"One day, when the war is over, I must take you both to some of my favorite dining spots."

"The council would allow that?" Waxer asked curious.

"I may be on the council, but I don't belong to it. I'm not certain that I'll have the appetite for any more adventures after the war ends." Obi-Wan sat back and waited for the food to finish

cooking. He looked thoughtful. “Either way the council will be in no position to refuse me leave. I’d have more than earned it.”

“And you’d want to spend it with us?” Boil asked, surprised.

Obi-Wan was taken aback. “Well, you and others… I may find things in this galaxy worth settling down for.”

Boil and Waxer shared a look that Obi-Wan couldn’t interpret, given that the simmering concoction threatened to boil over. Deftly, he removed it from the fire and portioned it into their separate dishes.

After they’d eaten Obi-Wan turned to them. “The question is, after the war will either of you want to spend another moment in my company?”

The men looked shocked by the notion. Obi-Wan lifted his hand to wave it off. “The Jedi owe you much. You deserved better. I know that. But maybe after the war, we can begin repaying you.”

He took their plates and placed them by the fire where he had a pot of water set to boil. “The republic … I… will be repaying you for saving us for many years, I expect.”

Chapter 39: wishful thinking

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys. thanks everyone for all the support! I'm busy and am struggling to get to everyone's comments. I appreciate them a lot, so thanks everyone!
>
> My wonderful beta is also very busy right now and I could use another one to assist me in future chapters. Is there anyone up for that? thanks!

Jango marched into the conference room, Myles close behind. He wasted no time in starting the meeting, launching straight into the key subject “our intelligence network has noticed increased chatter involving a conglomerate of bounty hunters. Target: the Runi'oyay'dinuir." he looks around making sure all eyes are on him. "We are on Red until further notice. We have practiced for this. We are ready."

Cody's attention, as usual, is solution based "origin?”

Myles stepped in to answer as head of intelligence "As of yet; Unknown."

"Anyone of note?" Vexa asked.

"Bane." Jango said, "Known criminal, weakness is credits."

"His involvement indicates significant incentive," Vexa said skimming through her slate "that limits origin?" she asks, looking up at Myles with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, origin is powerful, well connected, with resources. It’s a known pattern.”

He pulled up a holo showing a group of bounty hunters. “Dooku is known to have brought together a large group of bounty hunters, then whittled down to three. The significance of this is that, once again, it involved Cad Bane, and a group of bounty hunters.”

“I fail to see the connection; Dooku has been terminated." Cody pointed out.

"witness's?" Myles asked.

"Mission was chancellor recovery, we diverted Kenobi, judging Sidious too dangerous. Agents; Skywalker and Yoda." Cody replied.

"Skywalker was rendered unconscious. Yoda is reported to have executed Dooku. without collaboration we must consider contingencies"

“That is suspicious. We were never informed of that detail, and… admittedly I never thought Yoda had it in him.” Cody said thoughtfully.

“Our thoughts as well." Myles replied. "If we're right; Yoda's hands are still at play here."

The guards dragged Boil into the throne room. Obi-Wan followed not far behind, with his own escort. He saw the guards stop right before the throne where Jango sat, reviewing a holo of the earlier altercation. With Jango’s quick nod, the guards pushed Boil onto his knees, and Obi-wan would have flinched at the sharp crack, if he’d allowed himself to care. Safe beyond the wall of the storm, he could observe free of feeling. Jango had not turned his attention to the group yet. Pleased to make them wait.

Obi-Wan’s escort had positioned him right behind Boil’s bowed form, which gave him an unrestricted view of Jango’s close attention to the holo. With each viewing, the crease between Jango’s eyes grew deeper until he finally put the holo aside to look at them both, Boil kneeling and Obi-Wan standing, arms held firmly.

“Protocol.” Jango said, then stood and stepped down from the throne, coldness spreading out and rippling in his wake as he spoke with a Mand’alor’s authority.

“Protocol.” Jango said, louder this time, but still cold. He walked around Boil. “Past tenses… that was the moment you started to break ranks. You weakened yourself.” When Boil didn’t move, didn’t so much as lift his head, Jango turned his attention to Obi-Wan’s bruised face, searching for something. “Fifty lashes, public.”

Obi-Wan’d once felt his soldier’s pain and he knew this was meant to hurt him, but his empathy had been left in the centre of the storm. He laughed “is that all? Don’t hold back on my account Mand’alor.”

Jango left Boil to move closer to Obi-Wan who smiled at him. “Oh, my apologies. Did you think I still held any affection for that man? For any of his brothers? Why would I care what happened to one when there are so many, millions. They are as common as the ants in the dirt of Manda'yaim… and like all ants, they do nothing but follow orders, your orders.” Obi-Wan said, eyes not leaving Jango's eyes.

Jango tilted his head in thoughtful observation before asking: “You don’t mind?”

Obi-Wan replied lightly, “He’s as implicit in my imprisonment as yourself.”

“A ruse to spare him?” Jango suggested.

Obi-Wan smiled again. “What do you think?” In response, Jango raised a gloved hand to Obi-Wan’s face, holding it lightly along the jawline, turning it with surprising gentleness.

“Boil broke protocol,” he said, “For that he is to be punished. But you aren’t blameless. It’s your silver tongue that defeated him.” Jango turned back to walk past Boil, long strides, looking every bit the emperor, he’d become. Jango retook his seat on the throne. “Bring the Runi’oyay’dinuir. He will witness Boil’s punishment. Then, reintroduce him to the contemplation cell for the night. Tomorrow, he continues his instruction.”

“Logged, Mand’alor,” Vexa answered precisely, no deviation as usual in her tone. Nevertheless, Obi-Wan couldn’t stop himself a parting jab. “You know,” he quipped. “You can’t control everything, no matter how afraid you are.”

The way Jango’s head whipped back around was entirely satisfying. The way he laughed was less so. “Prickly today. I always enjoyed you like this.” He waved his hand and the guards pulled Obi-Wan back, leading him to the platform where Yoda’s blood was still a stain in his memory.

It started efficiently, Boil had already removed his armour, now his shirt was taken from him as well. His wrists in binders were hooked to the same spot Yoda had been.

Boil grit his teeth stubbornly. His jaw tense with the strength of it. His shoulders were a strong curved line against the sharp towers of Sundari. His chin was still lifted, he looked out on the busy square, lost in whatever memories he’d chosen for comfort. His body stiffened as the first strike curved over the skin on his back. A burn formed beneath it as it flicked back up to snap back down again, and again.

Soon Boil’s body was quaking, sweat sliding down adding to the blood breaking through. He flinched with each strike as they spread over every inch of his back. Then one wrapped around his left rib and he screamed.

Boil’s strangled cries tried to itch their way from his brain and into his soul, but he had to make sure he held the line. He wouldn’t let this hurt him. Not for Boil’s blood, not for his curved hunch when he finally weakened and collapsed onto his forearms. Not when his skin was so splint that it was hard to tell it had once been living flesh and not meat for sale at a market.

When Boil was dragged away, Obi-Wan couldn’t say with any certainty if the man was alive or dead. Or if he’d ever see any version of him again. It was strange to remember Boil as the comrade in arms that he’d loved. But that man was dead. The possible loss of this crude copy did not seem to reach inside him enough to entice his feelings.

He could vaguely recollect a time when the suffering of any innocent being would have been an unbearable rip at his chest. Now, it flickered through him like light through empty glass.

The walk to contemplation passed in a daze. He let the guards steer him forward, only a fraction of himself anchored. The rest of him drifted, meandering through memories he now understood were nothing more than dreams: sitting side by side at open fires, laughing at a joke told between friends. When the door clanged shut behind him, he felt no fear, only a muted relief at the finality of it.

He found the corner and lowered himself to the floor, letting the stillness settle around him like dust. For the first time he noticed the ache spreading out through his muscles; he must have been holding himself taunt the entire time and not noticed. He exhaled, loosened his posture, and stretched. Finally, he could turn inward, could reach for the last place that still felt untouched. At last, he would speak to Qui-Gon again, brush the edges of the past that had tet to be torn from him.

It only took a moment before Qui-Gon arrived, much like he had before, quiet, patient, and impossibly gentle in the ruin of Obi-Wan's mind.

"Obi-Wan." He said as he crouched down next to Obi-Wan. "I had wondered when you'd be reaching out for me again."

"They've kept me sedated at night," Obi-Wan supplied as explanation, before adding, "but you knew that. I assume you've been watching closely."

Qui-Gon nodded, the familiar, unreadable calm settling over his features. "I have. I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that Boil is fine. He's being treated with bacta, as we speak."

Obi-Wan considered his next words, before bluntly giving voice to the truth. "Actually, master, I don't care. Not like I once did. Boil made his own bed. I won't lie in it for him."

Qui-Gon, hummed judgementally, his hands at his sides. "You are changing Padawan."

"Change should be accepted without resistance; you taught me that, Master."

"Yet, like any man you fight it."

Obi-Wan let out a short, humourless snort. "What I fight is enslavement."

"Understandable," Qui-Gon said, "But that isn't the truth I'd hope you'd face. You struggle to accept what you are."

"'luminous being are we, not this crude matter' Yoda told me that once. I believe he'd say the same today." Obi-Wan said as he avoided the uncomfortable suspicion of where this was going.

"Stewjoni." Qui-Gon said. Silence followed, heavy and deliberate, each of them contemplating the direction the conversation had taken.

"You knew?" Obi-Wan asked at last.

Qui-Gon nodded, “Yes.”

“Who else knew?”

“What matters now is that you understand why,” Qui-Gon replied gently.

Obi-Wan waited, not responding.

“We needed to protect you.” Qui-Gon continued quietly. “Your people are critically endangered, they’ve been hunted, stolen, and enslaved. If anyone had suspected the truth, you could have ended up as nothing more than a pleasure slave for the rich and powerful. It would have hampered your ability to become a Jedi. You would have spent your entire youth watching your back.”

“And the best way to protect me was to leave me ignorant?”

“Obi-Wan…” Qui-Gon shook his head “this is not a productive…”

Obi-Wan saw no sense in allowing the other man his deflection “There is no ignorance, there is knowledge Master, or have you forgotten? Do you need a refresher on the Jedi code? I am happy to help with that… or you could answer the question. Why was ignorance the best way?”

“There is still much you have to learn.”

“Stop talking to me like a Padawan.” Obi-Wan spoke low and steadily. “In your absence I become a Knight and then a master, a council member. I am not the child you once knew. That boy died in the same moment you did. I am a man. I was a General, I have lived and loved and, without you, raised a boy into a man.”

“That is all true,” Qui-Gon said a hand up to placate. “I apologize Obi-Wan. I did not mean that as a reprimand, only as a reminder all of us should keep in mind, myself included. I have missed you, not the boy you were, but the man I always longed to meet.”

Obi-Wan gave a sharp, bitter laugh. “For the longest time I ached to hear those words from you. But now, they land on nothing. that they are said, they have lost their power.”

His voice thinned to something raw. “You thought keeping me ignorant would save me. Instead, it left me defenceless in ways you never bothered to consider”

“Obi-Wan…”

“Do NOT interrupt me. I knew that other Padawans explored such things, tested boundaries, learned themselves. But you insisted that any such wants or needs should be meditated away.”

“That was not…”

“I would have left the order for Satine!” Obi-Wan pressed on, not giving Qui-Gon the opening. “You sensed my conflict. You manipulated me. You made me believe it was the will

of the Force that I stay and complete my Jedi training!" His breath shook, but he didn't stop. "Why was I so hard to give up then? When you'd been more than willing to leave me on Melida/Daan?"

"There is still a lot I have not told you…."

"Then explain it. Tell me!"

"You are not ready." Qui-Gon replied, sage and immovable.

Obi-Wan shook his head and looked down "I am disappointed in you, master."

Obi-Wan stood, Qui-Gon was in *his* house now. This place was built on the foundation of his cells. It was a sacred place, a temple of the force that lived trapped by the suppressor… and the wave Qui-Gon brought in could not stand up to his towered walls. What Obi-Wan grew from that was his, and his alone. It was easy, slamming Qui-Gon behind a door. He would be a consideration not a compass. his salvation was not to be found in such small spaces. So, he left.

The temple sat upon a hill, a world sprawled out underneath it's shadow. It was not physically real, no one in the world could touch it. However, within the force it lived and breathed as any living thing. Here everything was alive. The living force.

The planet Mortis had been a world built by the will of the force. The Mortis gods had willed every part of it into being. They wove parts of themselves into it's being, good and bad. It had ebbed and flowed in chaos, bound to morph with the strongest of them. It existed on no maps and was not a place of physical mater as understood by science, instead it was a manifestation in the force, created by the will of the force.

Obi-Wan had visited it, walked it, and in a way, he'd come to know it. His journey there, with Anakin and Ahsoka, had been a strange physical handshake with the force. A physical manifestation witnessed only by those it wished to share itself with.

Within himself, the force had been confined. Here the only will that mattered was his own. He could create a world within the living force, morphing it as he chooses, a place that while he resided there, felt as real as the world he'd left in the dark of that cell. As real as Mortis, had felt.

It was here that he discovered power beyond his imagining. Power unlike that taught by the Jedi. Power over life… and death. Limited to his world to be sure. But he saw no reason why

that could not be expanded to the world outside himself, now that he knew how. Now that he'd lived within it and knew its shape, name, address. It would only need two ingredients, the will of the force, and the will within himself.

Obi-Wan having spent the night walking through the inner world of the force. And he was ready when the light returned and door opened. He stood and walked willingly to his captors. He went with them for a quick check over by Mij while Vexa talked through his day. First up breakfast. Though he was not hungry he ate as directed.

Next, he had training. It was there that he'd realized just how unfit he'd gotten. He shook, lost his balance. A strange weakness crept up from within. He needed to get back on form, at the very least so he could feel a little like his old self.

It was hard going, his body felt weak, dizzy. His had been going only ten minutes when shakily he sat down. Sweat was dripping from under his eyes and rolling down his cheeks. He did not comment when Vexa directed someone to get him some water. She was writing on her slate, now doubt making notes on his physical condition.

He closed his eyes for a spell, took the water when offered and sipped at it. After training was a quick shower before class. He was pleased to see it was only ba'jur'alor in class today. He wanted Obi-Wan to watch over his interview with Boil and start working on a report.

Obi-Wan watched it several times. Then parts again. When it came to the report, the man who had written endless reports in the war found himself still.

"Ba'jur'alor," he asked.

The man looked up, "yes?"

"I'm a little hazy on the specifics, am I meant to be honest, or should I assume the point of view you wish me to have?"

Ba'jur'alor considered him, a frown, a slight upturn of his lips revelled his displeasure "I expect you to write what you believe will be defensible when tested, and we will be testing it. Everything you write is up for debate. We will unpeel any weakness in your arguments."

"I'll make sure to do the same for yours; I wouldn't want such weakness to be left in your arguments any more than mine."

Ba'jur'alor wrote something down on his datapad. Then looked up again, clearly in thought about how to deal with his rebellious student. Obi-Wan felt a wave of heat roll over him.

"I would advise you to consider your behaviour Runi'oyay'dinuir. There are limits to the Mand'alor's lenience. You have had numerous behavioural flags this last week and clearly one night in contemplation was not enough to improve upon this."

Obi-Wan nodded "I appreciate the warning. Ba'jur'alor."

At lunch he had to force himself to eat. Another wave of dizziness hummed through his head, his bones felt as though they were grinding against his flesh.

“What ever happened to that poor man who dropped the tray?” he asked as he ate. “Did he survive?”

“He was dismissed.” Vexa replied “you need not worry for him, his wife is employed.”

Obi-Wan didn’t feel relived, though knowing the man’s fate had not been as bad as he’d allowed himself to imagine did, at least, pluck that weed of thought from his brain. His captive’s response had been disproportionate. He supposed that was his life now, disproportionate consequences all around.

After lunch was further instruction, though he found it to be unproductive, his thoughts were swimming, scattering over all the information the room offered, which turned out to be a lot. It was strange, like seeing the room for the first time.

Dinner was again hard to stomach. He ate because he didn’t want to irritate them into another strict diet. As that had been loosened over time, he’d been able to pick his own meals from the food presented. Though he was aware they were cataloguing his choices.

The lights which were normally at a level similar to outside on an overcast day, turned red and began flashing. The alarms started moments later. Before he could process the events hands were grabbing him. Everyone was moving. He was being dragged and on instinct alone he struggled. They never grabbed him like that when he’d shown no resistance. “Hold!” he shouted over the din of their rushing noise. Vexa’s voice was tense somewhere beside him “secure the Runi’oyay’dinuir!”

Obi-Wan was suddenly pushed to the ground, sending him giddy. He was vaguely aware of Vexa authorising something. He felt hands pushing his tunic over his shoulder and something sharp biting into the meat there. Of that strange feeling of warmth leaking into his skin. The voices of those around him echoed as darkness took his vision.

When he woke, he was in a small cell. He was laid on a bed. Mij was with him, pacing the short distance from one wall to the other. Something beeped alerting him to Obi-Wan slow return to consciousness. He didn’t’ warn Obi-Wan when his hand found Obi-Wans wrist, the one without the suppressor. Pulse taken the man proceeded to check Obi-Wan’s eyes.

Obi-Wan fell back to sleep.

Next time he woke, he was in his own bed. But something wasn’t right.

Korr Yanin ran, stumbling along a walkway between his apartment building and a block of public spaces and shops. He stumbled forward, having to push himself up from the ground ever couple of steps. The crowd was closing in around him, he snarled and swung. They backed away for a moment, but it only worked for a moment, they kept coming.

Someone grabbed at him; they were shouting at him. Giving chase, his feet thundered under him as he got himself steady enough to make another desperate run for it. He needed to find his contact. They would know who was after him, know a safe place to hide. But he'd gone by there earlier, they'd not been where they said. He feared they'd already gotten to them.

When he'd gotten home one of them had been waiting, a creature of black shadow there to intercept him, prevent him from leaving. He'd fought her off, but only just, she'd already gotten to his wife. He'd sobbed when he'd discovered her body. Then he'd run; and now the crowd was surrounding him like a wave. They wanted him to drown.

He sunk under their weight. His wife's face was the last thing he saw, her eyes wide in shock. Her blood on his shirt.

Chapter 40: Savage Torpor

Chapter Notes

> To those who ask if I have a plan: I do. It will take time to unfold--a beat, if you will--and the timeline won't change for the readers; I don't owe readers anything. If you think I do, then you are not stupid, not dull, just self-entitled. If you are searching for instant gratification, you will not find it here. There are many stories to pick from on a site like this. Plenty offer such things and are by good writers. I gently suggest you go read them. This journey has been long, but maybe, just maybe, you will find a fic for you!

Vexa double-checked Obi-Wan had settled for the night and was asleep before she handed the household over to the night staff. She made one stop to her office to write a log as reference for them.

“Household log,” she said, even. “Pre- and post-startle incident: pallor, diaphoretic episodes observed by staff; light-headedness denied when prompted. Appetite reduced. Recommend review by Medical at oh-seven; differential includes viral exposure vs contact reaction. Note: he is refusing to volunteer symptoms; approach with orientation, not confrontation.”

She paused. Obi-Wan seemed a little unwell–a flu, perhaps? Whatever was going on, it didn’t currently look too concerning. It was better to be safe than sorry, however.

She added a second, shorter packet to Mij’s direct queue, tagged with priority and the word she used when she wanted his attention without indicating an immediate emergency: “Concern.”

She hit send, turned off her station, and headed back to her quarters for some much-needed sleep.

Obi-Wan couldn’t get his skin to fit. He’d been tossing and turning between hot and cold. A moment ago, he’d been shivering. Now, the heat returned heavier. It was inescapable and desperate in its clawing.

His sheets caught on his limbs and tangled. He kept seeing flickers of Anakin, rough sand scratching at his skin, twin suns burning his flesh. Obi-Wan reached for him, but each time, Anakin stepped back into the shadows, out of reach.

Obi-Wan struggled up so that he was kneeling, searching the darkness as it swallowed the sands and Anakin. But he was gone. He froze, trying to find him in the dark, but he was alone.

That’s when the cold hit him. His teeth shook his skull. He rolled out of bed on a stutter-step and shouldered into the fresher. Heat. He needed heat and sand and Anakin.

He twisted the dial to as hot as it went, waited with urgency as it heated. At last he stumbled in, curled himself under the spray, still in his night clothes.

Household Security: Night Staff Station

“Orientation ping failed twice,” the junior watch tech said, eyes on the household board, brows furrowed. “Shower’s been at max four minutes. Thermal spike without movement.”

“Flag privacy override,” the night lead said. “Fresher cam, two-signature.”

They both signed off. The fresher feed came up: Obi-Wan, clothed, curled on the floor. He was whimpering; his muscles clenched and unclenched so intensely beneath soaked fabric they could see it over their feed.

“Vexa?” the junior asked, his voice raising a few notes at the end, earning the lead’s raised eyebrows.

“Wait on Vexa until we have eyes and vitals.” The lead paused, considering carefully his next choice: red or orange. He picked orange and typed the command. Orange wasn’t red but it still got people moving. Efficiency was as good at orange as red, activated less resources: a judgement call. There was no need to flood Obi-Wan’s room with personnel yet.

“Possible medical event,” the lead said, already standing. “Announce entry. Security two, Med one. Upper-arm holds only. Dignity is a constraint.”

They stayed at their post as one of the on-duty medics rushed through security and met with the two guards. Waited until they could see them arrive at Obi-Wan’s bedroom door to key them in. Protocol.

“Obi-Wan,” the guard called from the doorway, “Announcing entry. Night staff and medic. We’re coming in.”

They headed to the fresher door and asked permission to enter; they received nothing, and on permission from lead watch tech over comms, they entered.

The door slid open. Steam punched into the bedroom. Obi-Wan flinched, a trembling, soaked creature, cowering in the corner.

“Don’t…” His voice shook with his body, “Don’t touch me.”

“Contain without touch,” the lead said over comms.

“Logged,” replied the medic who had moved closer, flanked by the guards. “Obi-Wan, I need to see your face.”

Obi-Wan looked up, his face pale, his eyes wide.

“Name,” the medic tried next.

Obi-Wan fell into another fit of shuddering. “Ob-” He coughed. The tile tilted.

The medic edged a toe over the shower’s threshold, keeping his distance. “Request permission to turn the water down,” he said to the room and the recording strip. “Risk of burn.”

“Authorized,” the lead said, his voice now broadcasting into the fresher so everyone, including Obi-Wan, could hear. “Announce. Ask. Act.”

“Obi-Wan, I need to lower the temperature,” the medic said, “May I move close enough to turn it down?”

Obi-Wan, still jittery, shook his head.

The medic paused, shoulders slouching forward a little.

“This is a medical emergency, logged and overruled. Lowering temp,” the medic narrated. He moved closer until he was hovering near Obi-Wan, reached slowly for the dial.

Obi-Wan lunged faster than his condition would predict, a wet, clumsy strike. The medic rocked back, his hands up, but not fast enough to avoid a blow glancing off his cheek.

“Red zone,” the lead snapped from his post in surveillance, already moving, typing in ‘red’ and pushing enter. “Household alert.”

The two guards moved in to grab ahold of Obi-Wan's upper arms. He responded by planting his back on the far wall of the stall and kicking in their direction, heaving in air, a man unravelling.

The guards surged forward, over the top of his flailing body, under the spray. "Kriff that's hot!" one said, "Get it off now!" The medic leaned over the top of the scuffle to switch the shower off while Obi-Wan fought with the erratic movement of a small child and the strength of an adult.

Wrangling him turned out to be difficult, but ended with Obi-Wan restrained, face down on the fresher floor, and some bruised household staff. Guards were arriving outside the already cramped space, having received the red alert, leaving most of them in the bedroom itself.

"I'm going to check your vitals," the medic said, voice coming out breathy from the effort of avoiding the scuffle.

"Don't." Obi-Wan jerked; his breathing was fast. "Cold."

"Logged: reports cold," the medic said. "Logged," came the reply through his comms.

"Ear temp," the medic narrated, lifting the wand where Obi-Wan could see it. "I'm going to place this in your ear for three seconds."

"Hold," a woman shouted–one of the household crisis handlers had finally arrived, one of Vexa's juniors. "Protocol!"

The lead swore from his station. "Override!" he declared, causing the handler to pause, unsure. "All protocols have been followed! Proceed!" he all but shouted at the medic.

"Three… two… one." The wand chirped. The medic's mouth flattened. "Forty," he said, as calmly as he could manage. "Pulse one-thirty… he's hitting danger-zone."

“I’ll wake Vexa,” the lead said, no hesitation now. “Then page Mij. Turning down room lights by two until he arrives.”

The chime cut cleanly through sleep. Red. Vexa was upright in moments, jolted by adrenaline. “Report,” she said, already shrugging into a tunic.

“Runi’oyay’dinuir: febrile with rigors. Delirious, combative on approach. Red invoked for safety. We are in the fresher.”

“On my way. Dignity is a constraint,” she reminded, and cut the line. Finished dressing. Ran.

She slowed at the threshold; the gathered crowd parted for her. “All non-essential staff back to gallery! Two guards will do!” she shouted, irritated.

The crowd shifted to obey immediately. She rounded the corner to Obi-Wan restrained, his clothing being painstakingly peeled away.

“Obi-Wan,” she said, tone metronome-steady. “I’m here. No one is grabbing you that does not have to.”

The fact that he was currently too tired to reply worried her more than anything else.

He turned his head towards her, his pupils blown, his mouth open, breathing rushed.

“Name,” she said, soft.

He swallowed. “Cold.”

“Logged,” she said. “We’re going to get you warm.”

“Please,” he rasped, “Cold.”

“Two options,” Vexa went on, cadence unchanged. “We help you stand up and wrap you, or we lift and wrap. Which do you choose?”

Obi-Wan’s jaw chose that moment to start clattering. His muscles clenched, he shifted around searching for warmth.

“Lift,” she decided.

It was a challenge in the space of the fresher, but they managed to get him up on his feet. The rest of his night clothes peeled off, a towel draped over his shoulders.

“Dry shirt,” Vexa ordered, and the handler helped the medic get Obi-Wan into it. Every point of contact named, next smalls, working fast and exact.

“Okay, bed,” she said next; someone had already remade the bed with fresh bedlinens. Now someone pulled back the covers, one of Vexa’s team.

Only two guards remained in the room. Cody had turned up, was now being updated as to why his night staff had all been pulled away to one spot.

Not long after Obi-Wan had been helped into bed and Vexa had pulled the covers up to his chin, Mij arrived with a couple of other medics carrying a selection of instruments and medicine.

The medic already there briefed Mij quickly, condensing what he'd already sent to Mij on file.

Mij approached Obi-Wan moments later. "Obi-Wan, it's Mij, I'm going to take your temperature."

Obi-Wan was shivering again as Mij held the wand over Obi-Wan's forehead and then retreated. "Almost forty-one," he said; concern leaked through his voice.

"Oral antipyretic," he snapped back at his people, who were already looking for it, prudently anticipating what would be needed. It was handed to him a moment later.

"Obi-Wan, I have medicine for you–it will help bring down your temperature. We need to sit you up to take it."

Obi-Wan didn't reply; when the care staff moved to sit him up, however, he panicked. "No… Hold." He twisted back and forth, trying in vain to dislodge the hands reaching for him.

"Medical emergency; override 'hold,' logged," Mij said gravely. He then gestured to the guards, better trained in restraint. "Hold him, I'm administering an intranasal for anxiety."

Vexa's team backed up to allow the guards to do their job. Obi-Wan thrashed harder at the restraint, his lips pulled back, baring his clenched teeth. The guards held firm, however, one braced securely across Obi-wan's chest.

Mij was well-practiced, efficient. He targeted the right nostril–once, twice–and backed away.

The guards loosened their grip, and Obi-Wan collapsed back down in exhaustion. Soon his eyes closed, his consciousness losing the battle to the forced medicinal calm. Mij signaled to Vexa, and her people moved back in and helped Obi-Wan upright. Little ‘no’s still escaped his lips, but soon he was sitting, held gently up.

“Obi-Wan, I’m going to give you a dissolvable oral antipyretic to take down your temperature.” Mij unwrapped one as his staff held out a small plastic cup of water to him. “This will stop the chills you’re feeling.”

Obi-Wan nodded, seemingly understanding, and opened his mouth now without a fight. Mij placed the pill on his tongue, raised the cup to his lips.

“Metal,” he muttered, grimacing.

“Side effect from the intranasal,” Mij said. “Expected.”

“House to low, he needs his sleep,” Vexa said. “Usual staff, plus one with line-of-sight, continuous.”

“Medical?” the medic asked.

“Mij?” Vexa’s gaze didn’t waver from its lock on Obi-Wan.

“Labs at oh-seven. Fluids if BP drops. Watch for rigors, confusion, hypotension. If he starts to drift, cue orientation before touch.” He looked at the medic. “You take first watch, I’ll page Medical Control and have them send your replacement in an hour.”

“Logged,” Vexa said. “Dignity remains a constraint. Note: fresher surveillance authorized and running until the Runi’oyay’dinuir is within safe parameters.”

“Terminating Red,” the lead said over the intercom, tapping the panel. The tiny red diode flickered out.

Vexa turned to her charge. “Obi-Wan,” she said. “You are in your room. Night-cycle. You took a tablet to lower fever. No one will touch you without naming it first; however, medical needs overrule ‘hold’ rules.”

Obi-Wan looked her way. “Cold,” he said again, voice small.

“It will pass,” she said. “Breathe with me. In four. Out six.”

He was present enough to. She nodded, satisfied.

When the tremor eased to a shiver, she signalled everyone out. In the hall, she turned to Cody’s second. “Rotate security every twenty. No chatter.”

She gave herself a moment to take a breath–in, out. Turning to go, she added to them, “If anyone wants me, send an alert; I will be asleep.”

To herself: *Hopefully.*

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